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Marrying and Giving in Marriage

BY

MRS MOLESWORTH



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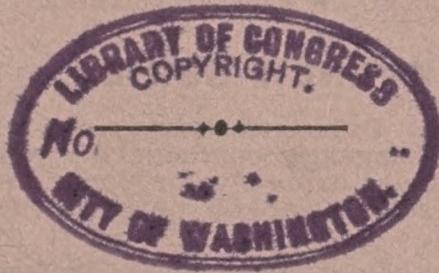
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MARRYING AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE.

A NOVEL.

BY MRS. MOLESWORTH.



NEW YORK:
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MARRYING AND GIVING IN MARRIAGE

CHAPTER I.

IT is but seldom in life that events—unexpected or little looked-for events more especially perhaps—bring with them cause for either unmixed rejoicing or unmitigated regret. I doubt if news often illumines a human countenance with less qualified pleasure than shone in the face of Lady Christina Verney the day that her husband announced to her his reluctant acceptance of a certain mission, diplomatic or financial, perhaps both—its precise nature may be left indefinite—which would oblige himself and his family to take up their abode in Paris for a period of several months.

Life, it is but fair to Lady Christina to premise, had not been all a path of rose-leaves to her. Her lines had lain over some rough ground, and the pleasant places had been tardy in making their appearance. And it is open to question if overmuch scrambling or picking one's way should be looked upon as of the nature of salutary and wholesome discipline. The skin may harden and toughen till the delicacy of perception and touch suffers irretrievably: some mire, too, is apt to stick.

And above all are these disastrous results to be apprehended when the outset of life—childhood or youth—is subjected to ungenial conditions. This had been pre-eminently the case with Lady Christina Verney.

"So you are pleased?" said Mr. Verney, rubbing his chin undecidedly, and staring into the fire.

"Pleased? I should think so. It is the very thing of all others I should have wished. It will bring you forward, Owen; there is no saying what it may not lead to. And—long ago I knew Paris so well—I shall be delighted to be there again, and above all to take Aveline."

"You will miss the season here," remarked Mr. Verney. He was far from a stupid man, but his wife puzzled him sometimes, well as he knew her, and he glanced up at her from under his shaggy fair eyebrows with a somewhat dubious expression.

Lady Christina smiled in a superior way.

"The season, my dear Owen," she repeated. "You surely do not think so poorly of me as to imagine me one of those worldly minded women who would complain of missing the season when it is so clearly at the call of duty. Besides, we may make some pleasant acquaintances in Paris. My old friend Madame de Boncœur will be delighted to introduce us; she's in a very good set, I believe. It will do Aveline no harm to see a little French society, though I should not wish her to form intimacies exactly. They look at things so differently from us; in some ways there is so little sentiment about them. They are so practical, so worldly."

"Humph," said Mr. Verney, "the French *have* a trick of calling spades spades now and then."

But he did not speak impressively, and his wife scarcely heard what he said.

"There is a coarseness about the French notwithstanding their surface refinement," she agreed—she would have agreed with anything Mr. Verney chose to say that morning. "No, I shall discourage any intimacies certainly. But there may be some of our own English friends there," she went on with an almost imperceptible change of tone, which did not, however, escape Mr. Verney. "The Em-

bassy people of course we shall know, and my cousins, the Roslands, will be staying awhile on their way back from Cannes, and—oh, yes, by the bye, I heard from Lady Ayrton the other day that Sir Francis will not be able to return home for three months at least, and they hoped to be joined by their son almost immediately. Poor Sir Francis, he has had a sad time of it. I shall be glad to cheer her a little, poor thing."

Mr. Verney did not answer. He was still staring into the fire, still rubbing his chin.

"I wonder what Christina has got in her head," he was saying to himself; but outwardly he made no sign.

"It will cost us a lot of money," he said at last, rousing himself; "I was talking about it to Bart this afternoon."

"Then if that is all Bart has to say on the subject he had better keep his remarks to himself," said Lady Christina, with a slight touch of asperity.

"Come now, Christina, you're not fair on him. *He* didn't suggest the idea, he only agreed with me when I said so. On the contrary, poor fellow"—but here Mr. Verney broke off, quickly resuming again—"he was saying we might let this house."

"Of course we can let this house," said Lady Christina; "I do not need your brother to remind me of that."

This time the asperity was quite unconcealed. Mr. Verney wished he had refrained from quotations.

He rose from his seat—a process which took some little time, for he was very tall and very spare, and his movements were deliberate—stretched himself as he stood on the hearth-rug, and seemed about to make up his mind to leave the room, when the door opened and a girl came in.

"Papa!" she exclaimed, "I didn't know you had come home. Are you busy?" she went on, glancing from tall, irresolute-looking papa on the hearth-rug to mamma, bright-eyed and energetic, already re-established at her

writing-table with a pile of notes and letters, of neatly docketed bills and tradesmen's books, before her—how many thousand times in her life had not Aveline Verney seen her thus?—"Are you talking? Shall I not stay?"

"We have finished talking," said her father.

Lady Christina said nothing. Five minutes before she had been in brilliant spirits, but somehow the mention of her brother-in-law had rubbed the bloom off her first pleasure. Still the stolid satisfaction was there, and it carried the day.

"No," she said, after a minute's silence, during which Aveline stood there uncertain, with an indefinite and not unpleasant feeling of expectancy. She was going to hear something; she scented it in the air. What could it be?—nothing bad surely. Papa and mamma did not seem annoyed. "No," said Lady Christina, "you need not go away. Owen, you had better tell her; she is no longer a child. At one-and-twenty," with this time the very slightest shadowy hint of reproach in her voice, "at one-and-twenty many a girl is at the head of a house. Tell her, Owen."

Then Aveline turned her inquiring gray eyes to her father. She was tall like him—tall and fair, but not spare, scarcely indeed to be called slight, but yet with a girlish liteness about her which accorded with the underlying appeal in eyes on the surface calm if not cold.

Mr. Verney unfolded his long length yet a little further, but slowly, as he prepared to speak.

"I had a letter from Paris this morning, Avé," he began. Then something caught his attention about the lower buttons of his waistcoat or his watch-chain; he frowned down at the misbehaving object and began disentangling it as if all else were unimportant. It was a peculiarity of Mr. Verney's to stop short at the end of the first sentence whenever he had anything of interest to an-

nounce. Aveline knew this so well that her eagerness increased.

"From Paris," she murmured, under her breath, and a faint color rose to her face. But aloud she said only one word—

"Papa!"

It pulled him together again, and the appeal, uppermost now in the girl's eyes, kept him to the point.

"Yes, from Paris," he repeated, emphatically, as if Aveline had questioned his statement. "I don't know if your mother told you that there was an idea, some time ago, of my undertaking a sort of—oh, you couldn't quite understand without a long explanation—a sort of mission there in connection with my department here. It will be a private arrangement—not coming much before the public. I thought it unlikely to go through, but to-day I have received the definite order of it, and I have accepted it. Your mother is pleased at it—and so are you—eh?"

For the girl's face expressed unmistakable delight.

"Of course I am pleased, papa," she was beginning, but her mother interrupted.

"I don't think that is the question, Owen," she said. "Aveline has, I *think*, been too well brought up to put her own personal likes or dislikes in the first place, when it is a matter of consequence for the whole family."

"I didn't mean," began Aveline, timidly, glancing at her father, but he said nothing. "We shall *all* go to Paris, I suppose?" she asked, this time speaking to her mother.

Lady Christina turned to her husband.

"What are you thinking about the little ones?" she said. "Of course Chris and Arthur will stay at school, but Leonora and the nursery children—?"

"They must all come," said Mr. Verney, more decidedly than he had yet spoken. "At least I won't go without them."

Then Aveline's face, which had expressed suspense, grew completely sunny again.

"I don't know what I should have done without Leo," she said, but too low for her mother to hear.

Mr. Verney was dining at his club that day. Lady Christina and her daughter were alone at table, and in such circumstances the dinner was of the simplest, for Lady Christina had not served her long apprenticeship to high-class poverty in vain.

Mother and daughter spoke little, but Aveline was not uneasy. She saw that Lady Christina was silent from pre-occupation of mind only, and that, apparently, not of a disagreeable nature. There was no sensation of weight in the atmosphere, as of a storm brewing, such as the girl had learned to descry the premonitory symptoms of, and to dread.

"Poor mamma," she said to herself; "no doubt she is counting over how many pairs of sheets and pillow-cases, and table-cloths, and tea-spoons will have to be packed up to take with us. I wish I cared more about things like that; if I did, perhaps we should get on better. I think I could fancy myself caring if—if I had a little house of my own, and somebody who thought I did things nicely, and—"

A moment later her mother looked up sharply, and glanced across the table. Aveline felt herself blush.

"What are you thinking of, my dear?" asked Lady Christina.

"A mixture of things, mamma," Aveline replied, truthfully. "Just at the very instant you spoke, I was thinking that mademoiselle has so often said that French pillows are a different shape from ours—she used to grumble at ours—and I was wondering if our pillow-cases would do."

Lady Christina still looked at her daughter.

"Was that really the only thing you were thinking about?" she said.

"‘‘Mamma!’’ exclaimed Aveline, “‘do I ever tell what isn’t true? I didn’t say it was the only thing I was thinking of—I said it was what I was thinking of at the instant you spoke.’’

“‘‘You are the very queerest mixture of a woman and a baby of any girl I have ever known,’’ said her mother. But her tone was not unamiable.

Aveline smiled a little.

“‘‘Wasn’t my remark a practical one?’’ she said. “‘‘Seriously, dear mamma, I do wish to be practical, and to help you more. You are always thinking and working for us. Wouldn’t it be a good time for me to begin taking more charge of things just now when we are going away?’’

“‘‘No, my dear. It will be time enough when you have a house of your own to take charge of,’’ said her mother. And Aveline said no more, though she sighed a little.

Lady Christina rose from table.

“‘‘I must go,’’ she said. “‘‘I have several letters to write to-night. You needn’t cut that tart, Aveline, it will come in so well cold for luncheon to-morrow. If you haven’t had enough to eat you can have something later with tea. I shall want a cup of tea, for I shall be writing till late.’’

“‘‘I’ve had quite enough, thank you, mamma,’’ said Aveline, getting up in her turn. “‘‘If you don’t want me I’m going to Leo in the school-room, and to say good-night to the little ones.’’

So she went off to the nursery, while Lady Christina took herself to her letters.

But Aveline did not stay long with the younger children. She was eager to get to the school-room, where her sister Leonora was still busy at work preparing to-morrow’s lessons.

“‘‘I’ve nearly finished, Aveline,’’ she exclaimed, as the elder girl came in. “‘‘Wait two minutes only, and then we can talk. Papa is out, I know.’’

"And mamma is busy. She doesn't want me," said Aveline. "I told her I was coming to you."

"And we can talk comfortably," said Leo; "I am so glad. I have such lots to say."

"Finish your lessons first," said Aveline.

She seated herself on the least uncomfortable of the school-room chairs, and drawing it toward the fire sat gazing into it, like her father. She was very like him as she sat thus, and Leo, darker and more energetic, hurrying to get her work done, peering with bent brows into dictionaries and grammars, reminded one forcibly of Lady Christina engrossed by her accounts. Yet in spite of difference of feature and complexion, that much-discussed outward expression of affinity, that commonly called "family" likeness, was strong and unmistakable between the sisters.
"There!" exclaimed Leonora, collecting her books and papers, and piling them neatly together as she spoke;
"there, now I've done. Mamma will be more particular than ever about my French now that we are going to Paris. I do so want to hear all about it, Aveline. Papa only told me a very little—he said I might ask you. Are we going soon? Aren't you awfully pleased, Avé? Avé, sha'n't we see Mr. Hereward there?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Aveline, somewhat impatiently. "You run on so quick, Leo, you confuse me. I wish you would talk of one thing at a time. We shall see lots of people, no doubt; I wish you were a year, or a year and a half, older—if you were seventeen, perhaps mamma would let you go out a little. It would be so nice. I should like it so much more if I had you to think about, and to talk it all over with afterward."

"We do the 'talking over afterward' pretty well as things are," said Leo. "And it is no use dreaming of my coming out till you are married, Avé. Mamma would not hear of it. So I hope you will take pity on me before long."

Aveline sat silent for a few moments. Then she said, rather abruptly:

"I know mamma would like me to be married. I sometimes wish it could be all settled, and that I could just be told I must do it—that it would be right. I don't know that I'd mind much."

"Wouldn't you just?" said Leonora, with school-boy emphasis, which she had caught from her brothers. "When it came to the point, and you found out that you didn't like the man—"

"No," persisted Aveline, speaking more eagerly than her wont. "I don't think I should mind. It would be a satisfaction to think one was pleasing one's family, and—"

"Suppose it was a really horrid man?" Leo interrupted.

"No good parents would want their daughter to marry a horrid man," said Aveline.

"But if you couldn't like him?"

"If one was quite sure one couldn't marry anybody one did like, or might have liked," said Aveline, vaguely, "I don't know that one would much mind."

Leonora looked at her reproachfully.

"When you talk that way you're not at all like a heroine—and I like you to be a heroine," she said.

"I never could be one," said Aveline, smiling. "But sometimes I think I should be glad to please mamma at almost any cost," and the girl sighed a little.

Leonora hesitated before she spoke again, and when she did it was almost in a whisper.

"Aveline," she said, "when you speak of knowing you can't possibly marry any one you like, are you—don't be vexed with me—are you thinking of Mr. Hereward?"

"Oh, Leo!" said Aveline; "you are rather tiresome. Why do you keep on always about Mr. Hereward? I'm sure I have told you about plenty of other men I have met."

"Yes," said Leo, composedly; "you have, certainly.

But many of them I never saw, and those I did see never took any notice of me. But he always did—he was so nice when he came to call on Sundays if ever I was in the drawing-room. Don't you remember, Aveline?"

"I've been trying to forget about him," the elder sister answered, naïvely. "I dare say I should almost forget him in awhile if I never saw him again. I think I shall be sorry if he is still in Paris when we go, for if he is I can hardly help seeing a good deal of him. Mamma likes him and she is sure to ask him. He would be useful to her, I dare say."

"Yes," said Leonora. Then she, too, sat silent for a few moments. "I don't think I want to be grown-up, and come out, and all that," she remarked, gravely, at last. "Life is very difficult for girls, I think."

"Well, perhaps then you can understand a little what I mean about French girls," said Aveline. "Life can not be so difficult for *them*."

"I'd like to know how they feel about it," said Leo. "Do you think we shall get to know any, *well*, Aveline?" Aveline shook her head.

"I don't in the least know how mamma intends to do," she replied. "She has some old friends in Paris, but I don't know if we shall know much of them."

Leonora was by this time ensconced on the hearth-rug, her head leaning on her sister's knee.

"What are you thinking about?" said Aveline.

The child—for she was scarcely more—sat up and looked at her sister.

"I don't quite know," she said, shaking her dark curly hair out of her eyes and smiling a little. "I think I was thinking what things I'd wish for if a fairy gave me some wishes."

"It's no use thinking of such things," said Aveline. "There are no fairies and no wishes, and not much good luck. Still there are some nice things sometimes. I'm

glad we're going to Paris—at first I was exceedingly glad, and then when I began thinking about it I was not sure about it. But on the whole I think I am. I am so thankful we are all going, Leo. It would have been dreadful if you had been left behind."

"But mamma never thought of that, did she?" said Leo, looking startled.

"*Papa* didn't," said Aveline. "He said he wouldn't go without you and the three little ones. And mamma is so anxious to go that she won't make any difficulties about anything."

"Is she so pleased about it?" said Leo.

"Very. I can see that she is. I wonder why—it will give her a great deal of trouble, and we shall miss the season here," said Aveline. "I suppose she will like to see some of her old friends again—she always says she was very happy in Paris when she was a girl. I think we'd better go to her now, Leo; she must have finished her letters, I should think," and Aveline got up as she spoke.

"I'm going to bed," said Leo; "I'm not dressed, and I'm sleepy. Good-night, Avé—if mamma asks for me, tell her I was doing my lessons till late, and so I thought I'd better go to bed."

Lady Christina was still writing when Aveline went into the drawing-room.

"Is that you, Aveline?" she said, with a slight touch of impatience. "I haven't finished my letters yet. Get a book, and don't speak to me just yet."

"I wonder what mamma has so much to write about. I wish she would let me help her," thought the girl to herself. But she sat down quietly, and either read or pretended to do so, till at last Lady Christina rose, with a sigh half of relief, half of weariness, two or three letters ready for posting in her hands.

"Ring, Aveline," she said; "I will send these to-night," she added, half speaking to herself, "even though it is

late. They may catch an early mail," and when the servant came into the room she told him to post them at once.

"Will you have a great deal to do about our going to Paris, mamma?" asked Aveline.

"Naturally," said her mother; "a family like ours can't be moved without a good deal of trouble. But as it is so clearly for—for your father's good, we must not mind the trouble."

"Shall we know many people there?" asked Aveline.
"Shall we go out a good deal?"

"I hardly know," said her mother. "Of course we must go out, though probably not as much as here. But I should like you to see something of French society, though I should not care for you see *much* of it. And there will probably be some of our English friends there—the Roslands and the Ayrtons certainly."

"Oh, mamma, not that horrid Wilfred Ayrton; it will quite spoil Paris if he is there."

"Aveline, I am ashamed of you," said Lady Christina; "you are really past the age for talking so childishly. You know very well that I am exceedingly fond of the Ayrtons. They have been very steady and kind friends to me for many years, and it isn't right to dislike a man just because he is—well, perhaps a little slow and heavy, and not particularly good-looking."

"It isn't for that I dislike him, mamma. He is so very selfish and—and coarse somehow. It isn't only that he is stupid."

"How often have you seen him to enable you to form such a matured opinion of him, may I ask?" said Lady Christina, icily.

"Oh, mamma, don't be vexed with me. I've only seen him two or three times, I know. But what does it matter? I do think Lady Ayrton's very nice and kind, and I'll like *her* as much as you wish. And it is she that is your old

friend, not that—not her son—so you needn’t be vexed with me,” and Aveline leaned over her mother to kiss her.

The kiss was not repelled; caresses were somewhat rare in the Verney family—perhaps Lady Christina appreciated Aveline’s kiss more than she would have thought it wise to allow, perhaps she had her own reasons for not wishing to rouse discussion or disagreement on the subject of Mr. Wilfred Ayrton. Be that as it may, she permitted, if she did not return, her daughter’s kiss; and there was even an approach to a smile on her face as she replied,

“ I am not vexed with you, my dear. I am very tired, and I have a great many things on my mind. I suppose it is impossible for a girl of your age quite to enter into all I have to think about. But don’t get into the habit of taking up foolish prejudices, whatever you do, Aveline. There is nothing more fatal to a girl’s success in life.”

“ One can’t help knowing whom one likes and dislikes, mamma,” objected Aveline.

“ Yes; but in many cases it is right to keep one’s mind and judgment in abeyance, as it were, and still more, to have *some* respect for the judgment of others—of one’s parents, for instance. And where your opinion of any one in particular has not been asked—”

“ You don’t see that I need give it,” said Aveline, laughing. “ Very well, mamma, I won’t obtrude my likes and dislikes, and I’ll try not to be prejudiced. Now, isn’t that good of me? What could I say more?”

The fair, smiling face was irresistible. Lady Christina herself was the one to volunteer a kiss this time.

“ Good-night, my dear,” she said; and as Aveline left the room, “ I am sure I only wish for her good,” she added to herself.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN one is still very glad of good fires in London—when it is indeed still so cold that it is difficult to imagine the time will ever return when a good fire will be no longer the best thing in life—there are, nevertheless, as everybody believes and as many people know for themselves, places where already it is almost overpoweringly hot. Pau is one of those places. All of a sudden some spring morning the sun bursts out with extraordinary vigor; the short season of sharp, biting cold seems like a dream, and one has to look at the dates of the newspapers or of one's letters to make sure that it is only March or April and not August.

On such a day, about four in the afternoon, one of the letters—the principal one indeed—that Lady Christina Verney had written on the evening after her husband's acceptance of the Paris appointment, reached its destination. This was the sitting-room of a handsome suite on the first floor of the Hôtel Beau Soleil. The person to whom the letter was addressed was standing near the window, beside which an invalid-couch was drawn up. A gentleman, elderly if not old, lay on the couch. At the moment the servant came into the room he was speaking in a rather querulous tone to the lady beside him.

"Away for the day, you think? It is very inconsiderate of him. *I* never see him. I might just as well have no son. But it must be your fault, Sophia—you have not the knack of attracting him to stay at home as other mothers manage to do. It is very hard upon me—this wretched health and everything—Wilfred first of all—going to the dogs."

Lady Ayrton moved to her husband with some words of apology or deprecation on her gentle, faded face.

"I'm sure I'm as sorry about it as you can be, Francis. I would do anything to—"

But the welcome words "A letter, my lady," interrupted her.

"A letter from Christina Verney. I am glad of that," she exclaimed. "I hope there will be something to amuse you in it," and she sat down as she spoke and began to open it.

"To amuse me," grumbled Sir Francis; "not very likely. This outrageous heat, joined to all my other discomforts, is enough to send me out of my mind or into my grave at once."

But all the same he watched his wife's face with interest as she read quickly down the first page of the letter and eagerly turned it without speaking.

"Well—what is it? What are you smiling about like a—what *is* there in the letter? Can't you speak, Sophia?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed. "I quite forgot you were waiting. I am so very pleased, Francis. The Verneys will be in Paris when we get there. Mr. Verney has to be there for some months, as Christina spoke of some time ago, and they are all going over."

"Is that all there is in the letter? I don't see that it matters much to us—I like Verney well enough, but I don't particularly care about him. I really thought there was some pleasant news for once," growled Sir Francis.

"It isn't *unpleasant*," said poor Lady Ayrton; "you have often said you liked both Christina and her daughter. The pretty, fair girl, you remember?"

"Yes—she's not a bad sort of girl. Quiet and nice-mannered, not one of those dreadfully noisy creatures you see so many of nowadays. If we had had a daughter like that now—but no doubt if we had had a daughter we should have had no more satisfaction out of her than we have out of that precious son of yours," said Sir Francis, waxing bitter over the imaginary daughter's deficiencies.

"Wilfred may marry," began Lady Ayrton, "some one whom you would really like, and—"

"I pity his wife," said Sir Francis. "I may be a selfish valetudinarian myself—I'm not going to defend myself—but, upon my soul, Sophia, my wife is not to be pitied in comparison with Wilfred's, should she ever come to exist. At his age I had some generosity, some chivalry, some ambition—but Wilfred—" and the invalid gave a gesture of disgust.

Lady Ayrton looked distressed.

"I think you are hard upon him," she said, timidly.
"All young men—"

"Don't talk twaddle, Sophia," interrupted Sir Francis, testily. "You know in your heart that what I say is true. You've got some scheme in your head, I suppose—some plan for marrying your precious son and reforming him—"

"My dear Sir Francis, I do beg you not to use such strong expressions," said Lady Ayrton, more resolutely than she had yet spoken. "Any one overhearing you would think Wilfred was a perfect reprobate."

"And they wouldn't be far wrong," said her husband. "Nevertheless, I'm not publishing my opinion to the world. There is no one to overhear what I say. And I have no wish to interfere with your plans—if you can get him married to any decent girl I am sure I shall have no objection. It would be a great relief not to have him always loafing about us."

"And not five minutes ago you were complaining that he never comes near you," said Lady Ayrton, with some spirit. "Really, Sir Francis—"

"Tut, tut, my dear, I'm not going to defend myself. Drop the subject, for Heaven's sake; we always quarrel when we talk about Wilfred—and no wonder. There is certainly nothing very agreeable to be said about him."

The subject in question was not fated to be so easily

dropped, for at that moment Mr. Wilfred Ayrton in person entered the room.

"Good-morning, sir. How're you getting on to-day?" And then, without waiting for an answer, "It's confoundedly hot; can't we get away from this beastly hole, mother? There's not a breath of air in the place."

Sir Francis looked at him without speaking; then he turned to his wife.

"Will you be so good as to give me my book?" he said to her, coldly but civilly. It was one of his peculiarities always to speak civilly to his wife in his son's presence.

Lady Ayrton handed him the book; then got up and crossed the room to the further window—the letter which had drawn forth the discussion with her husband still in her hand. Mr. Ayrton followed her.

"What's the matter with him to-day?" he said, in a whisper, though not so low but that, had he been particularly anxious to do so, Sir Francis might have heard his words. "Not much inducement for a fellow to try to please a surly old—"

"Wilfred," said his mother, with a warning glance.

"Well, I want to talk to you, mother. Will you come out? The band's playing, and those girls that arrived last night are sure to be at it. I want to see them—I rather fancy they're good fun. I only came in because you're always bullying me about being civil to the guv'nor, and I didn't exactly want to get further into his black books at present."

Lady Ayrton sighed.

"Is it about money again, Wilfred?" she asked.

"I don't see what else it's likely to be about," was the gruff reply. "I'm not going to stand this doling out money to me when I know that there's plenty. I'm five-and-twenty—it must all come to me sooner or later, and it's downright absurd that I should be kept as short as a school-boy."

Lady Ayrton did not answer. She glanced at Sir Francis—he seemed to be falling asleep.

"We can talk better outside," she said. "I will go with you to the band. Wait for me at the door of the hotel. Your father is asleep, I think."

Five minutes later the mother and son were on their way to the "Place," where at a certain time of day, in fine weather, many of the visitors assemble. Mr. Ayrton had not apparently recovered his good temper. His face, at the best of times heavy and stolid in expression, looked sulky and forbidding; his short, thickset figure was not rendered more graceful by a certain lifting of the shoulders peculiar to him when displeased. Lady Ayrton, whose proportions were far from sylph-like, whose fat, fair face could scarcely be called interesting, seemed attractive and agreeable in the extreme when compared with her unlovely son. She had in her time been a pretty girl; a more genial and active life might have left her still a pretty woman. Sir Francis, on his side, had been remarkably handsome, and, intellectually speaking, a man of parts; why Wilfred should be what he was, was a problem over which his father sneered in his cynical moods, and groaned at those times when physical suffering left not even strength to be cynical.

The pair walked on for some little way in silence. Suddenly Mr. Ayrton gave an exclamation.

"There they are! Look, mother—those people on the other side. The one in that green-and-gold dress is the best-looking, and the jolliest too, I fancy."

Lady Ayrton raised her eyeglass and looked languidly across the street.

"Americans, I should say," she replied; "I never can admire Americans, Wilfred. They may be handsome, but they are such very bad style."

Wilfred's face grew sulky again.

"Sure not to admire anything that takes my fancy,"

he muttered. Aloud he said, "What sort of girl *do* you admire? There's not a decent-looking one here that I've seen."

"No," agreed his mother, "I haven't seen many this year. Perhaps we shall be more fortunate in Paris, Wilfred. I hope to meet some old friends there. I have had letters to-day."

Wilfred did not seem particularly interested.

"If it's anything to hasten our leaving this place I shall thank my stars," he said. "I couldn't have stood it till now if I hadn't been hard up."

"How are you hard up?" asked his mother. "Your allowance is a magnificent one, Wilfred; for a man alone I don't see that you could wish for more."

Mr. Ayrton grunted. The best part of him came out when he got his long-suffering mother to himself. At least he was sure of being listened to and not sneered at with caustic bitterness which he felt though he scarcely understood the keenness of its edge.

"I dare say you're right," he said, speaking, for him, gently. "But I do wish for more all the same. I've no one to care what I do or how I live when I'm not with you, and I can't stand my father for long. And so I get into all sorts of things—things it's no use telling you about—and then my money goes. I wish you'd made a soldier of me, or a sailor, or a backwoodsman, mother. I'd may be have been good for something."

"You might have been in the army—your father had no objection—if you would have worked," said his mother, regretfully. "The diplomatic service was what we wished, you know."

"Oh, that's rot," said Mr. Ayrton; "I never could have stood the work, even if I could have got into it. What's the good of being rich if one's to grind away like that?"

"I was only taking up your own words—about wishing you were good for something," said Lady Ayrton.

"But the point to attend to at the present moment is about my getting the money I want," said Wilfred.

"The getting it for you will fall upon me as usual, I suppose," replied his mother, "and I am by no means sure that I shall succeed. Your father is growing tired of it, Wilfred; and so am I. Things can not go on like this. We must come to some sort of understanding."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mr. Ayrton, sulkily. "It must be all mine some day. Other fellows would have got all they wanted long ago, considering that—that's one thing I *haven't* done, but there's no saying what I mayn't be driven to."

"Driven to ruin yourself, you mean, Wilfred," said his mother. "It's no use talking to you about breaking my heart and your father's, but you can not be completely indifferent about your own future."

"'Pon my soul, I don't know but what I am," replied he, kicking some pebbles with his foot as he spoke.

Lady Ayrton took no notice of this ejaculation. They had reached the Place by this time, but they were still at some little distance from the more crowded part where the band was playing. An empty bench under some trees was near them.

"Let us wait here a moment or two," she said, sitting down. "There is something I want to say to you. You can surely give me your attention for five minutes—you can find out the American beauties afterward," she went on, bitterly; for though Mr. Ayrton had sat down beside her, she saw that his eyes were roving here, there, and everywhere, in search, doubtless, of the green-and-gold costume.

"I'm quite willing to give my attention," he replied, arranging his silver-mounted walking-stick so as to be able

comfortably to suck the great knob at the top between times as a little refreshment.

Lady Ayrton sat silent for a moment, looking before her. The beautiful sunlight glimmered through the trees overhead, their leaves casting strange fantastic net-works of shadow on the hot gravel beneath. The clear voices of some birds twittered cheerily close at hand, while the music of the band sounded pleasantly soft in the distance. A pretty, bright-eyed girl of seventeen or so, passing at this moment with her mother, glanced at the two on the bench, and a slight expression of surprise crossed her face.

"How can people look so gloomy when everything is *so* delicious?" Lady Ayrton heard her say.

The poor lady sighed, but the remark had aroused her.

"Wilfred," she began. Mr. Ayrton left off sucking his cane for a moment, and gave a slight nod to indicate that he was not asleep.

"Fire away," he said, lazily.

"Wilfred," she went on, "what should you think of marrying?"

Mr. Ayrton started slightly—started and then frowned. "Awkward, rather," he muttered to himself, but his mother did not hear the words.

"Don't see the use of it," he said, aloud.

"It would please your father, it would please *me*," she continued, her voice trembling a very little with the last words. "It might be the beginning of a new life for you. Your father would pay your debts again, I feel sure, if you married to his satisfaction, and you might start clear on an income more than sufficient for every comfort and luxury you could wish. And, you say you have no one to care for you, Wilfred, can you not imagine yourself caring for and being cared for by a good and sweet girl?"

Mothers are proverbially partial; Lady Ayrton had cherished her maternal illusions with exaggerated solicitude, even while refusing to own to herself the frailty of their

origin, but yet, as the words “a good and sweet girl” crossed her lips, she hesitated and faltered. Mr. Ayrton was not looking his best at that moment. His face had darkened again, his shoulders were up above his ears—he was not an attractive object, to put it very mildly. His sullen-looking mouth was firmly shut, and he gave no signs of intending to open it.

“Wilfred,” said his mother, after a little pause.

“What is it?” he said, without moving.

“You might answer me.”

“I’ve nothing to say. I don’t want to marry; I only want to get the money I need, and to be allowed to do as I choose.”

“Well, then,” said his mother, suddenly rising to her feet and speaking with a strength and decision quite new to her in her son’s experience, “I wash my hands of you. I shall not ask nor advise your father either to increase your income or to pay your debts. I am tired out by you, Wilfred—I can do no more.”

But even while she spoke her voice broke a little—tears were not far off. Mr. Ayrton seized his advantage.

“Don’t excite yourself so, mother,” he said, putting out his hand and drawing her down again on to the bench. “You shouldn’t be so vivacious just because I didn’t jump up and say I’d rush off to the unknown young woman on the spot. I need to think it over, surely. In the first place, who is she? I know you’ve some one in your head. Sit down now and tell me all about her, and let’s talk it over comfortably. Who is she? Out with it. Who is she?”

Lady Ayrton swallowed down the lump in her throat—she had lived to be thankful to Wilfred for small mercies. She cleared her voice before she replied.

“You scarcely know her—the—the girl I should like you to marry. But you have seen her and you have seen her people. My very old and dearest friend is her moth-

er. I mean Lady Christina Verney. The girl I am thinking of is her daughter Aveline."

Mr. Ayrton gave a low whistle. "That girl," he ejaculated; "*she's got no tin.*"

Lady Ayrton repressed a slight gesture of disgust. "Oh, Wilfred," she said, "is there nothing better than that in you—nothing of what I hoped for when you were a little innocent baby? Do you not care for anything except money?"

"It isn't money I care for—it's what it does. There's no getting on without it. And I don't see that it would mend matters for me to burden myself with a wife and family," he replied, half sulkily and half with a clumsy attempt at jocularity.

"You said something about having no one but me to care for you. Would you not like to have a wife who would care for you? And if you married to please him, I—I scarcely like to say so much—but I think your father would do a great deal. He might even give you the Garthdean property at once, and you know that brings in an income even you could not grumble at."

Wilfred's small eyes sparkled.

"Garthdean," he repeated, whistling again; "Garthdean! Do you really mean what you say, my lady?" his way of addressing his mother when in rare and high good-humor. "Yes, that is worth thinking about, and no mistake. But why have you both taken such a fancy to this girl? I don't remember much about her. She's tall and fair-haired and very quiet—not much go in her. Isn't that the girl?"

"She is an exceedingly good girl, very well brought up, and one that both your father and I could love as a daughter," replied Lady Ayrton. "And the Verneys are poor—very poor—for their position; and, with their large family, they would be glad to have Aveline well settled, and—

I think she is the sort of girl to appreciate being chosen for herself."

" You mean that she'd think me disinterested, and all that sort of thing, if I chose her, when of course, if that Garthdean business is settled as you say, I could do so much better," said Wilfred, coarsely.

His mother looked at him with again that painful sensation of disgust.

" You could *not* do better, even according to your own very practical way of putting it," she said, coldly. " The Garthdean business, as you call it, will certainly depend on your readiness to please us in this matter of your marriage."

Wilfred looked sulky again.

" I call that rather hard lines on a fellow," he said. But as his mother made no answer he added, after a moment or two—" I'll think about it. I dare say she's not a bad sort of a girl." Inwardly he said to himself, " She's a stupid, sleepy creature, I fancy. If she had a pretty house, and some old women and school-children to look after, I dare say she wouldn't interfere. I'll think it over," he repeated, aloud.

" You will do well," said his mother. Then she stood up and proposed to walk to that side of the Place whence the view is so beautiful and far-reaching. Wilfred for his part would have preferred mingling with the crowd, and passing the green-and-gold costume, but he thought it wiser to be conciliatory at the present juncture. And Lady Ayrton seemed ready to be more insistent than usual.

" If this *is* to be the turn with him," she thought, with again a faint flutter of hope of better things in her faithful mother's heart, " I must keep him about me as much as I can. I should like people to notice it."

And she exerted herself to be lively and entertaining, smiling and even laughing a little when they met some of their acquaintance, so that more than one of the English

visitors remarked it, and said to themselves that it could not be true that Mr. Ayrton was so disreputable, his mother and he looked so happy together!

But no one heard the deep sigh that she gave as she stood at last, with her gentle, tired face turned to the sky, against which the great snow-covered heights of the Pyrenees shone out in pure, lonely majesty.

"Am I doing wrong?" she thought. "It is so difficult to know. Heaven and pure disinterested goodness seem *so* far away, and life is so perplexing. Why was he not a girl? I might have succeeded better."

She glanced at her son as these thoughts passed through her mind. He was not even pretending to look at the magnificent panorama before him—his heavy-featured face, redder from the sunshine and the heat, was smiling half sulkily at the antics of some little dogs growling and snarling a few paces off, as he stood there, stolid, thick-set, and self-satisfied—of the earth, alas, and very earthy.

"I will go home now," said Lady Ayrton, with a slight shiver, hot though it was. "Come with me to the beginning of our street, Wilfred, and then you can return here, if you like."

Her spirits rose a little when she found herself alone again. After all, she had not altogether failed in her first attempt—she could write a cheerful and encouraging letter to "Christina" about her "plans."

"Dear Christina," thought the poor woman to herself, "how I wish she were here! No one can ever understand me and all my troubles as well as she does—ah, dear, she thinks want of money the worst trouble, but I can't agree with her when I think of her children—those sweet girls, and her fine, intelligent, manly boys."

A long letter was dispatched to London in answer to the one we have followed thence to its destination—a letter which Lady Ayrton greatly enjoyed writing, and which

caused a smile of pleasant expectation to light up the face of Aveline's mother when she had read it.

"Nothing could promise better," she said to herself. "I felt sure Sir Francis would act liberally if the idea were really suggested. And, indeed, what could they wish for more? They don't need money—and one of *my* daughters as his wife will be the very making of the young man. If I could but put a *little* more worldly wisdom, a little more practical common sense into Aveline—but it will come—doubtless it will come."

CHAPTER III.

MME. DE BONCŒUR "received" on Sunday evenings. She begged her friends to come early: she was, so she said, "old-fashioned" in her ideas and past the age to remodel them. She was, in point of fact, a good deal older than she looked—old enough to be proud of the distinction of years, to be more inclined to add one on than to take one off, and to enjoy the look of incredulity with which strangers, especially if they were foreigners, received her announcement of the sixty-nine "winters" she had seen.

"Yes," she would say, "I have lived through many changes, outlived many good and some bad things, but the world has not grown cold to me yet. I speak of my 'winters' because the association better suits my white hair and my withered skin, not because I find the world wintery. Surely not; on the contrary, I am in no hurry to leave it, though that must be as the good God wills, of course. I live again in my children and my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren, the little dears. Yes, Jeanne has two boys, and her brother Séverin's wife had her first child, a magnificent little girl, last month. My daughter's daughter is not yet married, a trifle difficult to please perhaps; but it will come all in good time; and, indeed, I

scarcely know what I shall do without her when that day *does* come, my good little Modeste! But we parents must not be selfish: a bad thing to delay marriage too long, as I always remind my daughter De Villers. And Modeste is reasonable, in no way fantastic; it will be all right."

So the old lady would chatter on, though even to her most intimate friends never too long or too exclusively on her own affairs, her bright eyes and pretty gestures enhancing the charm of her conversation, so that after a first interview every one went away delighted, sure to remark to the first common acquaintance, "How lovely Mme. de Boncœur must have been in her youth!" The delight remained, and usually deepened into hearty liking and esteem, but the faith in her by-gone beauty had to be abandoned. It was well known that as a young and even middle-aged woman the baronne had been rather remarkably plain; as is the case in certain landscapes, the partial decay of late autumn had brought with it to her a beauty unknown to her summer or spring.

Her daughter, Mme. de Villers, had been, and at forty-two still was, much handsomer than Mme. de Boncœur at her best. But, though handsome and amiable with the amiability of a somewhat self-concentrated and lethargic nature, she was without the elder lady's "charm," and, besides this, incontestably less intelligent. Modeste de Villers was as handsome as her mother, as bright and sympathetic as her grandmother, bidding fair, when time and experience should have matured her faculties, to be as intelligent and cultivated. Already she had profited much by constant intercourse with Mme. de Boncœur, with whom, since the death of M. de Villers, she and her mother had almost entirely lived.

It was a pleasant house to visit at—a convenient lounge of a Sunday evening for those who only cared to pass the time agreeably, a center of lively talk and varied opinions for the more active-minded. For Mme. de Boncœur,

"old-fashioned" though she liked to call herself, was not so in the narrow sense of the expression. Or, rather, perhaps it would be more correct to say, her "old fashions," the social opinions and creeds of the France of her day, were less narrow in some notable respects than those of more modern French society.

To give but one instance in point. She had not prejudice or prepossessions against foreigners, for in her youth the salons of Paris received and welcomed many of the most "irreproachable" families of the European upper classes. Foreign travel was not then a mere question of money, open to the all and sundry who can afford it. The rush of tourists, who, having spent six weeks in Switzerland, steamed down the Rhine, and visited the Saint Chapelle guide-book in hand, thinking they had seen "the Continent," was yet to come. And, still more important from the social point of view, there were in those days English and other foreign families making their homes in Paris and other Continental towns for longer or shorter periods, whose reasons for thus pitching their tents in strange lands would bear inquiring into, without risk of some tragic or piteous or, still worse, scandalous revelation resulting therefrom.

So Mme. de Boncœur enjoyed the entertaining of strangers, and as her relations with English society dated back some one or two generations, so far nothing had shocked her delicate perceptions, or startled her into resolving that she must close her doors to her neighbors from across the Channel.

Her salon is rather unusually crowded this Sunday evening on which we first visit it. The Paris season—earlier a few years ago than now—was at its height, and on this particular Sunday the sudden collapse of one or two expected entertainments had left a good many people at a loss what to do with themselves.

The buzz of talk was becoming bewildering, a few guests

were beginning to think of withdrawing, when the double doors again flew open to admit a tall young man, who at once made his way across the two rooms to the white-haired hostess. For a minute or two, busy talking to those near her, she did not see him. He stood waiting quietly, with a simple ease of bearing devoid of the slight awkwardness an Englishman usually feels and shows in such circumstances. Yet he *was* English—a glance at his figure, an instant's gleam from his pleasant blue eyes, told the story, though his hair and complexion were dark enough to perplex those French critics who can only think of us as sandy or flaxen. And something too in his manner, a ready grace, a touch of respectful deference, as he gently took and bowed over the little thin old hand at last held out to him by Mme. de Boncœur, was scarcely “English.”

“Welcome at last, dear sir,” said the old lady, cordially. “But you are very late! I hear—I am sorry to hear—that the serious illness of the old duke has stopped my cousin’s ball this evening—so you mean to make up for your tardiness by staying later than you sometimes do, I hope.”

“I confess that idea has suggested itself to me, dear madame,” he replied, with a smile, in fluent and *almost* accentless French. “I should have come earlier had I been going on to the ball. As it was, I waited to finish some letters, counting on your well-known indulgence.”

“Better late than never in your case assuredly,” she answered. “I particularly wished to see you. I have some news which will interest you, I think. Wait till the rooms are cleared a little, and then we can have our chat. There is my daughter, and Modeste. They will be as charmed as ever to see you.”

And with a little wave of her hand the old lady sent him off to the other room, where Mme. de Villers and her daughter were standing near the piano.

“By these ladies too, Mr. Hereward, for such was the

name of the young man, was cordially greeted, Mme. de Villers extending three fingers, and her daughter bowing with a pleasant smile.

"You have a very crowded reception this evening," he said to the elder lady.

"Yes," she replied, "there is nothing else to do, I suppose—two dances have fallen through, you know."

"I know of one having done so," Mr. Hereward said, "but I hardly think that would make much difference to your salon, except that it may have allowed people to stay a little later—every one likes so much to come here."

"And my mother likes to have them," Mme. de Villers replied. "The more crowded her rooms are, the better spirits she is in. I don't care so much for the world, I don't like the trouble of it. But I foresee that Modeste will be her grandmother over again. She takes so much interest in everything—she even says sometimes she would like to travel—to foreign countries, I mean," and Mme. de Villers opened her sleepy eyes to express her astonishment. "I confess I don't understand *that*. We are fortunate in making pleasant foreign acquaintances without leaving our own country."

Mr. Hereward bowed in acknowledgment of the implied compliment.

"Modeste," continued her mother, "is looking forward eagerly to making acquaintance with the daughters of an old friend of ours who is coming to Paris soon—Madame, or rather I suppose I should say, Miladi Christina Verney. I do not understand your English titles. Her husband, it appears, is only plain 'monsieur.' Do you know them?"

Mr. Hereward had not been listening very attentively. Mme. de Villers's voice was slightly monotonous, and it was in general quite easy to go on thinking of other things, while nominally, so to speak, engaged in conversation with her. His eyes had been wandering about, and just as she left off talking they had been caught by something in the

figure and pose of a tall girl at the other end of the room, which reminded him of some one else.

"If the hair were several shades fairer," he was saying to himself. "The color of the hair makes a great difference—the way it is done, and the shape of the head are very like. I wish she would turn this way. No, better not, perhaps, it would destroy the illusion."

He started as Mme. de Villers touched him on the arm with her fan.

"What are you thinking of, my dear sir?" she said, smiling. "Twice I have asked you if you know this English family—these old friends of ours, and you don't seem to hear."

Mr. Hereward colored to the roots of his hair.

"I beg your pardon—ten thousand pardons," he said. "I am frightfully ashamed of myself. I did not catch the name you mentioned. Will you say it again?"

It was true that Mme. de Villers's French pronunciation of the name had prevented its attracting the young man's attention. Even now she had to repeat it more than once before his slightly bewildered ears took it in. Then suddenly his whole face lighted up.

"Verney, did you say, madame?" he repeated. "Lady Christina Verney? Know them?—of course I know them very well indeed. Are they coming to Paris, did you say? I had not heard of it."

"I wonder you did not know. You in your official position should hear of such things sooner than any one, for this gentleman, it appears, is coming over—sent by your government, I suppose—on some mission, I don't know what. Some financial matter between the two countries."

Mr. Hereward's face cleared still further.

"Ah," he said, "I understand. I knew some one was coming over, but I did not know Mr. Verney had been fixed upon. A very good choice, too. They will probably be here some time, then."

"Some months," said Modeste de Villers, who, though she had been standing near, had not yet spoken. "I am so pleased, for I am sure these young ladies must be charming. *Bonne maman* says she is sure they are very well brought up."

Mr. Hereward smiled. It was not often he had heard Mlle. de Villers say so much, for the typical French girl has far less to say for herself than our English maidens. Modeste spoke with a rather prim childishness, and yet quiet self-confidence, quite indescribable to those who do not know it. But it was quaint and pretty, especially as the girl herself was decidedly pretty, and had a soft and musical voice.

The young Englishman's smile somewhat disconcerted her. She blushed slightly, and a slight look of misgiving crossed her face.

"You smile, monsieur," she said. "Was it at anything I said?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Hereward, hastily, a little ashamed of himself. Mme. de Villers, by this time fatigued by her unusual energy, had sunk into an arm-chair, from whence she could scarcely, through the music, hear what her daughter was saying. "That is to say, there was nothing to cause a smile in what you said, mademoiselle. I smiled from several causes, but all pleasant ones. Among others I was picturing you and Miss Verney together. You would make a charming picture."

"How? Is she at all like me?" asked Modeste, with quiet girlish curiosity which made her manner more natural.

"No, she is quite different. There would be the charm of contrast. She is exceedingly fair—fair even for an English girl. Her sister, on the contrary, is as dark as you, mademoiselle."

"Her sister—how old is she? Are there two grown-up daughters?" asked Modeste.

"No, only one. The second one, Leonora, is quite young—fifteen, sixteen—I don't know exactly. And there are several still younger boys and girls of all ages. But I do not know much of any of them, except—" Mr. Hereward hesitated, "except of Lady Christina, and—I used to meet Miss Verney, of course, at dances and evening parties."

Mlle. de Villers looked up at Mr. Hereward with a peculiar expression in her brown eyes. It was not often that she talked so much to a young man—but this was an Englishman; that made all the difference. She had heard a good deal from her grandmother about English manners and customs, for Mme. de Boncœur considered herself a great authority on the subject, and something in Mr. Hereward's tone had suggested a vague suspicion that here might be one of the curious instances of young people in England managing their own affairs, of which hints had reached her. Modeste felt suddenly venturesome.

"Is Miss Verney pretty?" she asked, abruptly, still keeping her eyes fixed on the young diplomatist.

"Pretty," he repeated; "no, mademoiselle, she is not pretty. I should rather say she was beautiful."

"Ah!" said Modeste, with a half-audible sigh of satisfaction. Her instinct had been right. There was a flush of unusual color on the girl's pale face as she turned away.

"I should like to marry some one who would speak of *me* in that tone," she thought. "Monsieur Tercy St.-Ange would never have done so, I am sure. Yes, *bonne maman*, I am coming," for her grandmother's voice summoning her to her side sounded across the room.

An hour later the salons were all but deserted.

"I shall hope to call on Friday" (which was Mme. de Boncœur's afternoon at home), said Mr. Hereward, as he approached his hostess to say good-night, "and then, if you are less engaged, perhaps you will tell me about our

friends' coming. It is too late to-night—you, madame, must be tired."

"Not so tired as all that," said the bright old lady, motioning the young man to a chair by her side. "Stay five minutes. What was it I wanted to say? Oh, yes. This good Christina has written to ask me to help her to find a house. But I am putting the cart before the horse, surely. And I told you the news that my friends—and your friends also, the Verney family—are coming to Paris?"

"You yourself had not told me, but I have just heard it from Madame de Villers," he replied.

"Ah, that is all right then. My old head is not as clear as it used to be. Miladi sends messages of remembrance to you in case I should see you. But I am quite embarrassed about this question of a house. She says 'house,' but she must mean an *appartement*, not a *hôtel*. It is several years since she was in Paris—perhaps she forgets?"

"She must certainly mean an *appartement*," answered Mr. Hereward, with decision. "The Verneys are far from rich—they could not afford a *hôtel*. And furnished *hotels* are not easy to find—as you know. Shall I look about a little—I had to do so for my sister last year—and report to you what I see? We are not very busy just now."

He spoke with an evident eagerness which did not escape the quick-sighted old lady.

"It is most amiable of you," she replied. "And you will probably know better than I, both what they want and what they can afford to give. I know all about English tastes and ways, of course—but you, having seen them all more recently, may be better acquainted with their particular likes and dislikes. Then shall we leave it so? You will look about as you did for madame your sister, and you will report to me? And of course, if necessary, I or my

daughter could go and see any *appartement*. Yes—it is an excellent idea."

There was an unmistakable tone of relief in the old lady's voice which caused Mr. Hereward an invisible smile. He would have liked to lead her on to speak more of the Verneys, but he judged it wiser not to do so.

"There will be plenty of opportunity for my hearing all she has to tell," he reflected, and for the moment he looked about for some other subject of conversation.

"I did not see St.-Ange this evening," he said, suddenly. "He has been here so regularly of late that one misses him."

"Yes," said Mme. de Boncœur, composedly, "we have seen a good deal of him this year. He is an excellent young man. He will be here again next week, I dare say." She looked up at Mr. Hereward quickly as she spoke. Something in his expression decided her to say more.

"You have heard a rumor perhaps that he—that something has been in question with regard to this gentleman and my little Modeste," he said.

Mr. Hereward felt and looked slightly awkward. He had heard the rumor—had been indeed assured that it was more than a rumor. Mme. de Boncœur smiled at his embarrassment.

"Do not look so unhappy about it," she said. "You English do amuse me sometimes. It is the simplest thing in the world. I was only going to ask you, as you know several of Monsieur St.-Ange's friends, to contradict it. It is always best to have no misunderstandings about such things."

"Then it is certainly not to be?" asked Mr. Hereward.

"Not to be," said the old lady. "He is excellent, as I have said, and for many reasons we should have liked it. But they have seen enough of each other now to judge, and Modeste does not care for him."

"And he?"

"He has never been sure enough of her to allow himself to get exceedingly attached to her. He would never care for any girl who did not really care for him. Perhaps it is that very want of fervor about him which has lost his chance. However, there is no harm done—far better than your English way of rushing into a thing without reflection, and discovering the want of congeniality afterward."

"But, madame," began the young man, eagerly, "I assure you—"

"Ah, yes—ah, yes—I know what you would assure me! I have heard it all so often. That there are so many happy marriages in England, etc., etc. Well, so there are in France! Mind, I speak of the present day. I am not so wedded to the past as to defend the old system, which you English still believe in as devoutly as many French believe that you all still dine like Germans at one o'clock, and that nothing is to be seen on your tables but half-raw roast beef!"

"I have not found the French so ignorant," said Mr. Hereward, with a smile.

"Perhaps not, because you have known principally those of Paris, the most cosmopolitan capital in the world; still more, your acquaintances are not only of the quite upper classes, but many of them people of the day—who *can not* be so ignorant. But wait till you know some of our regular old country families—people who never leave their châteaux. Then talk of ignorance."

"It is much the same in all countries, I suppose," he replied. "It is astounding how little we know of each other when one considers that a mere strip of water separates us physically. And though we English travel so much more, I doubt if we know much more of the *people* of other nations, speaking generally, than they know of us. We see the places, but that tells nothing of the home life."

"You know *less* of us in that sense than we know of

you," said Mme. de Boncœur, decidedly. "Your novels, even though so seldom to be compared with ours as works of art, can be and are far more widely read by foreigners than ours, and their constant theme is English home life. Then, too, you are so much more quickly hospitable than we. Such of us as do go to England are at once admitted into the real family life, whereas it is not one foreigner in a hundred, nay, in a thousand, that really sees our inner circles."

"You have thought a great deal about it," said Mr. Hereward, admiringly.

Nigel Hereward's head was rather in a whirl as he made his way home. "I have no reason to suppose it will hurt any one but myself," he reflected, "and that's my own affair. I may go on scorching my wings if I like. Were it otherwise," he hesitated, "in that case I'd try to get away from Paris before they come. I'd do anything rather than risk suffering for *her*. But her mother is a sensible woman, and she has never seemed to mind throwing us together; she must know her own child, and, of course, she knows *I* can't dream of marrying for years and years, if, indeed, ever. No, I don't see but that I may make myself miserable with a clear conscience—it's no one else's business. Dear me, how little I imagined when I went to Madame de Boncœur's to-night what I was going to hear!"

He stood still on the bridge—he was just then crossing the river from the old street where he had spent the evening on his way to the Champs-Elysées quarter where he lived. The stars in the cloudless sky overhead were reflected in the clear dark water below, the fresh night air seemed unusually reviving and inspiriting; everything spoke to him of hope and happy augury. It is so easy at five-and-twenty to think that one's wildest dreams may be realized.

"Who knows," thought Nigel to himself, as he at last

walked on, “ who knows what may turn up? My great-uncle Fortescue may leave me a legacy after all, or Roderick’s babies may all die of the croup—nay, what a shame of me to think of such a thing even in joke!”

And with a laugh he stepped on lightly.

There was a letter on his table when he let himself in—a letter from his step-sister. He ran through it hastily; it contained nothing of much interest. But as a postscript, she had added, “ I hear Sir Francis and Lady Ayrton and their son are going to stay in Paris on their way home. Be civil to them, as they are neighbors of ours.”

“ That little beast!” ejaculated Nigel. “ I wonder if he’s improved since the licking Seaforth and I gave him at school as a finish up. If not—I certainly pity his belongings.”

CHAPTER IV.

IT was April—to my mind, if the weather be fine, the prettiest month of the year in Paris—when the Verneys arrived there. And the weather was fine, peculiarly so; and not Paris only, but the world and life in general, seemed very bright and attractive to Aveline and her sister Leonora the first morning they awoke to find themselves across the channel.

“ Isn’t it nice? I wish I might say jolly, but I daren’t,” said Leo, as she and Aveline stood at the open window, from which by craning their necks just a little they could see into the Champs-Elysées. “ Isn’t it nice to see the sun shining so, and—and—to have no governess?”

Aveline laughed.

“ Yes,” she replied, “ it’s very nice for us any way, Leo. I’m afraid papa and mamma have had a good deal of worry.”

This was true. There had been a dark side to this sil-

very vision of coming to Paris. Mr. Verney had had to work a good deal harder than he was fond of doing in getting up the statistics and technical knowledge requisite for a thorough mastery of the tangled question he was to set to rights. For though he had an excellent head on his shoulders, he was constitutionally indolent. And Lady Christina, who could certainly be accused of no such weakness, had been driven nearly wild by the discussion of ways and means necessitated by the family flitting. Paris and its ways had changed since the days of her youth; and even had it not been so, the views or no views of a young lady in her father's house apropos of rent and wages, of butchers and bakers and coals, differ materially from the painfully minute consideration of such subjects forced upon the mother of a large family; above all, if she be the wife of a man of small income but recognized social position. Nor was the poor woman as yet by any means out of the wood of her perplexities. Aveline's words of misgiving had scarcely passed her lips when Lady Christina put her head in at the door.

"Aveline, my love," she said, "I think you had better help Fenton a little with the unpacking. It is not really that there is too much for her to do, but if you and Leo were with her, showing her how you would like your things, it might cheer her up a little. She says she is sure she is going to have one of her bad headaches. Indeed, all the servants are so cross, and we must smooth them down a little before nurse and the children come. I've sent her to lie down for half an hour and given her some sal-volatile."

"Then you don't want me to go to her at once?" said Aveline, coming forward.

"No, but in the meantime you might help me by sending a word to Lady Ayrton—she begged me to write as soon as we arrived. Here is her address—no—what have I done with her letter?—that is Mr. Hereward's note of

this morning. He will be here between three and four, he says, to see if he can be of any use, as I told you, so we must not go out before then. I must be civil to him, for he has done his best, poor fellow, though really this *appartement* is full of inconveniences. Where is Lady Ayrton's letter? I can not remember what day she said they were leaving."

"I know her address if they are still at Pau," said Aveline. "They will not have left yet—there will be time for her to get a letter."

"Yes—oh, yes. Then just send her a word, dear, and give her our address again. She is so very stupid about addresses, poor dear. Tell her I will write as soon as I have a moment, and that you hope Sir Francis is pretty well, and send my love. Write nicely—you know how."

"Yes, mamma," said Aveline.

"And sign yourself, 'yours affectionately,'" added Lady Christina, stopping a moment at the door.

"Certainly, mamma, if you wish it," replied the girl, though with a shade of hesitation.

"I do wish it. It will please her," said her mother, as she at last disappeared.

Aveline stood by the table a moment in a sort of vague consideration. She felt a little, a very little, puzzled.

"Avé," said Leo, from the balcony—she had discovered while her mother was speaking that the window at the other side of the room actually opened upon a tiny balcony—"Avé, look here; there's just room for us two if we squeeze a little—isn't it nice? Come out here for two minutes. You'll have plenty of time to write the letter. Avé, tell me, don't you think mamma is—"

"Is what?" said Aveline, slowly. But she did not look at her sister as she spoke. Her gaze was turned to the sunny street below, where a pretty group of children and nurses were passing at the moment. The little voices sounded clear and merry; some birds were twittering

cheerily as they hopped from branch to branch of a tree whose fresh green leaves one could almost see growing; from further off the rumble of carriages, the sound of a barrel-organ softened by the distance, fell not unpleasantly upon the ear. Everything was cheerful and lively and novel. Why did it all seem just a shade less bright than a few minutes ago? Why was the sunshine a faint degree less vivid?

"That mamma is what?" Aveline repeated; and now she turned her eyes to Leonora and looked the child full in the face.

"I don't like to say it. You are so particular, Avé," replied Leo. "What I would like to say if I dared, only I haven't said it, so you're not to scold—is, don't you think mamma is *after something?*"

"Leonora, you are very naughty, very, very—horridly disrespectful and suspicious," said Aveline, indignantly. "It just shows that I must never speak to you as if you were at all grown up—which you *aren't*."

"No, indeed," interposed Leo, disconsolately; "this frock is, I vow it is, two inches shorter than my last. And when I showed it to Fenton, she said my lady wouldn't hear of my having them longer. Just look, Aveline," and she stretched out, as far as she could in the restricted space, a pair of very pretty, irreproachably black-silk-stockinged legs, "I'm *sure* you couldn't see as much of them in my old blue serge! You needn't snub me, too, Avé."

"Which you *aren't*, and won't be for a long time," pursued Aveline, as composedly as if Leo had not spoken, "if you can speak so of mamma. I feel ashamed of having heard it—just when I was thinking how wonderfully kind and good and patient poor mother has been through all the worries she has had about coming here. She has not been the least vexed with me, and I know I don't help her much."

"She won't let you. It's not your fault," said Leo.
"After all, I've not said anything shocking. It's just because mamma has been so very kind and patient—you are rather provoking sometimes; both you and papa want shaking now and then—that I said that. Don't you know when Freddy's extra quiet, as it's his nature to be dreadfully noisy, we always say, 'What can he be after?' Everybody's the same. If you took to scurrying about and putting everything in order, and being dreadfully energetic, I'd say to myself, 'Avé must have got something in her head.'"

"No, it wasn't quite like that you said it. You meant that mamma was, in a way, coaxing me, or trying to come over me, as the boys say. And it isn't a nice way to speak of one's mother, Leo. Besides, what reason could she have for anything like that?"

"I don't know," said Leonora, bluntly; and then she sat still for a moment or two. "Aveline," she went on, "do manage for me to be in the drawing-room to-day when Mr. Hereward calls. I do so want to see him again."

"I think mamma is very wise indeed to keep you in short frocks," said Aveline, laughing, as she got up to go and write her letter. The happy look had come back to her eyes, and the sunshine was as bright as ever again.

Mother and daughters were together in the smaller of the two salons that afternoon when Mr. Hereward called. It was quite against all home rules for Leonora to be seen "out of the school-room," but, for the moment, Lady Christina's usual arrangements were very much upset. Governess there was as yet none, and the only "school-room" possible in the *appartement* promised to be this same little drawing-room opening with folding-doors into the larger one.

"Let her stay with us for this day or two, mamma," pleaded Aveline. "She has been working hard lately,

and I will make her talk French as much as I can. Here is my letter to Lady Ayrton; please tell me if it will do."

Lady Christina's rather sharp face seemed to relax as she read the sheet that Aveline gave her.

"Yes," she said, "it will do," and she smiled a little. "You might have made it a—well, a *little* more expansive."

Aveline raised her eyebrows, with a look of surprise.

"More expansive, mamma!" she exclaimed. "But I know Lady Ayrton so slightly."

"You know that I consider her one of my dearest friends. And don't get into that habit of repeating my words, Aveline. It *is* so rude."

"I beg your pardon, mamma," said Aveline, meekly. "And what about the letter? You see I meant to make it very—very respectful, as it were. I know she has been a faithful friend to you, and I do respect her and feel grateful to her for that."

"Ah, well, never mind what I said. I dare say it will do very nicely, my dear," said Lady Christina, mollified again. And Aveline, as she went off to announce the good news to Leonora, thought to herself that it really was very nice for mamma to be so kind and easily pleased.

She looked bright and happy that afternoon when Nigel was announced, and his eyes rested on her for a moment with even more admiration than he had yet felt for her.

"So good of you to come so soon, dear Mr. Hereward!" said Lady Christina.

"Yes," added Aveline, smiling; "do you know, it is quite absurd, but though we have not been here twenty-four hours, Leo and I have been saying to each other that it would be quite a treat to see an Englishman."

"Are you so very patriotic?" said the young man. "How much more animated she has grown! She has lost that dreamy, half-frightened look she used to have. It

had a charm of its own, but this is still more charming," he thought. And something of these thoughts must, in spite of himself, have appeared in his eyes, for a very, very slight tinge of color came over Aveline's fair face. Alas, poor Nigel! "And where is Leo!—that is to say, Miss Leonora. Must it be that now?" he added, turning to Lady Christina.

"Oh, dear, no," she replied, quickly. "Leo is quite a child. Where is she?" and hearing herself summoned, Leo, very conscious of the objectionable short skirt, emerged from the balcony, and came forward, for once in her life, rather shyly.

"She is growing a very tall child," said Mr. Hereward, as he shook hands, with less tact than might have been expected of a young diplomatist.

Lady Christina did not smile, and hastened to change the subject.

"I am, and so is Mr. Verney, so very much obliged to you for all the trouble you have taken for us," she said, graciously. "I hope we shall see a great deal of you while we are here, though, I suppose, you have many friends and plenty of engagements?"

"Of course I know lots of people," he said, "and I am kept very busy, too. But I can certainly always find time to come to see you if you will let me. There are no friends like old friends. You must tell me if I can be of any use, at any time and in any way."

Here Leo opened her mouth as if about to speak, and then shut it up again. She looked so funny that Aveline began to laugh. Nigel glanced at her with some surprise—he was thinking to himself that he had never heard her laugh before, and that it was astonishing how well it suited her, notwithstanding her statuesque style.

"What is it, Leo?" said her mother. "Speak, child." Leo grew red,

"I was only thinking," she said, "there are such lots of places and things we want to see, and papa says he's going to be so busy here."

Mr. Hereward looked up eagerly. "I should be delighted to act as cicerone," he began.

"You are very kind," Lady Christina replied, amiably, while quick as lightning she mentally reviewed the situation. "There can be no risk in it," she thought, "he is quite safe. Satisfactorily poor, that is to say, so poor that he can't dream of marrying. No half-and-half position. I have never heard of his doing anything silly; he just admires all pretty girls, knowing he can go no further. With Fenton and Leo, Aveline might go to see the galleries and churches with him now and then, and it would make it seem natural for her to go about with the Ayrtons when they come, if I at once adopt the rôle of not being able for much. And he is an old friend—cousinly sort of friend."

"You are very kind," she repeated, slowly. "I should be very glad if you could escort the girls once or twice to see a few of the sights. They are quite country cousins here, you see, and I am really not strong enough for sightseeing. Nothing knocks me up so." A slight, almost imperceptible movement of Leo's chair here made her mother glance at her sharply. "What are you fidgeting about, Leo?" she said. "It will be easier in a week or two, when the friends we are expecting from the south come," she went on to Mr. Hereward. "Aveline will then never be at a loss for escorts, and I shall, I trust, have found a governess for this wild tomboy here," with an indulgent smile in Leonora's direction meant to counteract the sharp glance in case Nigel had perceived it; "but till then it will be very good of you to act showman a little."

"When shall we begin then?" asked Mr. Hereward. "No time like the present, and I am quite free to-day. Have you made any plans?"

"I am going to Madame de Boncoeur's as soon as I can

get ready," said Lady Christina. " I should like the girls to join me there later in the afternoon."

" Shall I take them to the Louvre palace?" said Nigel, " and thence across the Tuileries gardens to the Rue de Touraine? It would give them a first rough idea of where they are."

" I should like it very much," said Aveline.

" Then go and get ready, both of you, and tell Fenton to accompany you, of course. It will do her headache good."

" And you like your *appartement*, I hope?" said Mr. Hereward. " I am sure it can not be all you wish, but it really was not easy to find anything that would have taken you in except at a very much higher rent. Madame de Boncœur's ideas and mine were somewhat opposed—her notions of your requirements were rather amusing. But, on the whole, I don't think we could have done better."

" I quite believe it," said Lady Christina. " The situation could not be better, and no doubt we shall get used to it all in a few days. Of course we have plenty of room at present, but the three little ones will be coming in two days."

" Oh, of course," said the young man, vaguely.

" We couldn't leave them behind, poor little things," said Lady Christina, who had begun to long for Freddy and Lilian and Cecil already, though she would not have owned it to her husband; and Nigel, seeing the maternal love in her face, began, man-like, to think he had done her injustice.

" No, certainly not," he said, warmly.

" But, oh," Lady Christina went on, allowing herself a momentary burst of confidence, " it is so hard to manage such a family with so little money! Don't *think* of marrying, my dear Mr. Hereward, till you are at the top of the tree, or very near it."

The young man laughed, but his laugh was slightly forced and constrained.

"No," he replied; "nowadays I suppose romance has to go to the wall."

"You can't help its going to the wall when debts and difficulties push their way in," said Lady Christina. "I am parodying the old proverb. But it is certainly better to give romance the go-by before marriage, than to let it say farewell to you *after* marriage."

Mr. Hereward had strolled to the window, for he had not sat down since the girls left the room.

"Life isn't an easy matter to see one's way through. After all, it seems sometimes as if the soundest philosophy were to 'gather the roses while you may,'" he said, lightly.

"Provided you don't mind scratching your fingers in the process," said Lady Christina, rather pleased with her smart rejoinder.

They both laughed, but she had no idea of his unspoken reply. "So long as I'm sure it is only *my* fingers, I do not mind."

And then the door opened, and Aveline and Leo, bright with pleasure and expectancy, came in, the discreet Fenton looming in the background.

Along the Rue de Rivoli, as everybody knows, it is impossible of a fine day to walk three abreast. It fell out naturally therefore that Aveline and Mr. Hereward made their way in front, Leo and the maid bringing up the rear some little way behind, and to this arrangement no one made or felt any objection. Leo was completely absorbed in looking about her, and under the rain of her lively remarks, the sunshine and the agreeable movement around, even Fenton's plaintive countenance began to cheer up. As for Aveline, it may be seriously questioned if she had ever felt so happy in her life.

"I had no idea Paris was so delightful," she ejaculated,

more than once, to her companion's half-amused but wholly admiring satisfaction.

"It is very nice—of a bright day, and—and when everything seems to match," he said, smiling down at her, as he thought to himself how this unspoiled simplicity, this readiness to be pleased, added new charms to the girl already so lovely in his eyes. Just then a whisper from a lady passing them, an Englishwoman, of course, caught his ear. "Honey-mooners evidently," she observed, archly, to her companion, as her glance fell on the stately young pair. A flush rose to Nigel's temples, but Miss Verney walked on in serene unconsciousness.

"What would she have thought if she had heard it?" he said to himself.

Then she turned to him with some question, and their talk fell on the place and things about them. And in a few minutes the little party found themselves at the entrance to the Louvre.

Inside the galleries they naturally kept more together. Leonora overcame her shyness and chattered like what she was—a school-girl out for a holiday. And indeed on her elders, too, something of the holiday spirit seemed to have descended. Not often had the treasures of the Salon Carré been admired by more smiling eyes, or the Galerie d'Apollon trodden by more springing feet.

"Thank you so very much—we have so enjoyed it," said Aveline, as they were nearing their destination, for "The Rue de Touraine is the next street on our right," Nigel had said a moment before.

"I hope we may have many, at least several more such afternoons," he replied. "Lady Christina said something about friends joining you before long. Are you expecting relations?"

"Oh, no," said Aveline, "I think mamma must have meant the Ayrtons—they are to be here for some weeks on their way from Pau."

She spoke indifferently, but with a slight shadow in her voice. Some instinct made her dread the coming of these friends of her mother's, whom she scarcely knew.

"The Ayrtons!" repeated Mr. Hereward. "Oh, yes, I heard they were coming. But Sir Francis Ayrton is a confirmed invalid. I scarcely see how he can be anything in the shape of an escort for you."

"Nor I; I don't quite understand what mamma meant," said Miss Verney. "Unless it is to drive about with Lady Ayrton—she is very kind, I know."

"But very fat, poor woman. I don't think she would ever get to the top of the Arc de Triomphe, for instance—if you really mean to do the sights thoroughly you must, at least sometimes, have a man with you. There is a—a young Ayrton," he went on, slowly, looking at Aveline as he spoke, "but—"

"But he is *horrid*," said Aveline, impulsively. "I shouldn't say so, perhaps, for I have only seen him two or three times; and it isn't kind—especially as his father and mother are really good friends of mamma's—to speak against their son—I dare say they think him delightful."

"I should doubt it," said Nigel, dryly.

"Why, you are as prejudiced as I!" exclaimed Miss Verney; "mamma was giving me a lecture about being prejudiced the other day apropos of this very Mr. Ayrton."

"Apropos of *him*," said Mr. Hereward, in a curious tone of voice. "No, Miss Verney, in this instance at least I am not prejudiced. I had the—the misfortune to be at school with the person in question. But do not let us talk any more about disagreeable subjects, and so spoil the flavor of our afternoon at the end."

Here Leonora, who had been walking beside the others, for they were now in a quiet street where the passers-by were few, suddenly made a remark which seemed to restore Mr. Hereward's slightly disturbed equanimity.

"Avé," she said, "don't you remember mamma said

she *did* expect to have some relations here? The Roslands, that nice Amy and Mr. Rosland. Perhaps it is they whom we, or at least you, are to go about with."

"Oh, yes," said Aveline, "I had forgotten about them. It must be Mr. and Mrs. Rosland she meant."

"To be sure," said Nigel, heartily. "And very nice people they are. But here is Madame de Boncœur, so I must say good-bye."

"Aren't you coming in with us?" said Miss Verney, in a tone of disappointment. "I am just a little afraid of Madame de Boncœur, and even more of her granddaughter, even though mamma is sure to be here. And you know them so well. Why won't you come in?"

He shook his head laughingly.

"It is not their day," he said. "Madame de Boncœur would, I assure you, be utterly astounded if I marched in. She'd never get over it—she would not indeed. Pray tell Lady Christina that I shall hope to have the pleasure of calling in a day or two to see if I can be of any use. You will find Mademoiselle de Villers a very nice girl—you will, really," he added, as he raised his hat in farewell.

Lady Christina had been sitting with her old friend for the last hour. They had met with genuine pleasure and interest on both sides, though not without some natural emotion; for it was seven years since they had seen each other, and then but hurriedly, and nearly four times as long a period had elapsed since the days of Lady Christina's youth, when she and her sisters had accompanied their father in his official capacity to Paris. The elder of the two women was less changed than the younger.

"You do not look a day older, dear madame," said her guest, "while I, I feel, am dreadfully aged," and she sighed. "I have so many cares—a large family and small means."

"But a good husband and, I hear, charming daughters," replied the old lady, patting Lady Christina's hand encour-

agingly. “These are compensations in your large English families. Think how empty *my* home is! Only my daughter and the one grandchild. Ah, yes, there is always the *revers*. ”

“Well, of course, when one has them, one can not wish they were not there,” agreed Lady Christina. “But I could with great philosophy have resigned myself to one daughter only, I assure you, instead of three—not to speak of four sons.”

“Seven!” exclaimed the old lady, lifting up her hands. “Tell me all about them;” and Aveline’s mother, not unwillingly, plunged into a description of the family party.

“I must see them soon, especially your eldest, and she and my Modeste must be friends.”

“I hope so, indeed,” said Lady Christina. “Aveline has never had many intimate friends. I have endeavored to form her mind myself and to guide her judgment. Young people are so easily deceived, so apt to be carried away by outward appearances.”

The old lady nodded.

“Doubtless,” she agreed. “Still, they must learn to form their opinions. My Modeste has a great deal of character, I am glad to say. She will, I think, make an excellent wife and mistress of a household. And I think I may say we have made a good choice for her, though nothing is as yet announced.”

Lady Christina pinched up her lips.

“Ah, indeed,” she said, “and I hope your granddaughter is—is quite pleased? Have she and the gentleman met yet?”

Mme. de Boncœur looked at her and began to laugh.

“My dear friend,” she exclaimed, “you seem to take your notions of us from old-fashioned French—or English—novels. Do you really think I would drag my granddaughter from the convent to the altar, there to marry a man she had never seen? Of course Modeste has seen

Monsieur de Bois-Hubert; he has visited at my house for some time by my permission, as have done others, equally unobjectionable, but with none of whom things went further, as natural sympathy and attraction were evidently wanting. Modeste has had, and will have, before things are concluded, ample opportunities of judging for herself. It is only fair and reasonable. All I, *we*—her mother and I—are concerned with, are the first essentials, without being assured of which no man should be admitted to our intimacy. You will see Monsieur de Bois-Hubert here often. I intend to have week-day receptions, too, for a time; the young people may perhaps dance a little sometimes, and by the end of next month or so I hope Modeste will have decided in favor of this gentleman. Indeed I feel sure of it. But at present all I tell you is in confidence."

"Thank you. I am flattered that you should give it me," said Lady Christina, sweetly; "and you may be sure I shall observe it strictly. I shall not mention this, even to my daughter."

"Oh, as for that," said the old lady, shrugging her shoulders a little, "I leave it to you. If the young creatures become friends, it will be only natural that Modeste should give your child some of her confidence."

But Lady Christina, though she said nothing, privately resolved that Aveline should be cautioned against over intimacy with Modeste de Villers. "French girls are so differently brought up—have such strange ideas about marriage, and so on," Aveline should be told.

And she thought to herself that this sort of modern modification of the "dreadful system of arranging marriages" was really far from an improvement. "For all the world," she confided to her husband, "like servant-girls and their sweethearts 'keeping company,' as they call it." To which Mr. Verney replied that for his part he had always thought "keeping company" a most sensible institution. No more, however, was said on the subject of

Modeste's prospects by Mme. de Boncœur, for just then the door was thrown open to announce the Misses Verney, and Mlle. de Villers was summoned to make their acquaintance.

"I hope we are not late, mamma," said Aveline, when the first civilities had been exchanged, and Mme. de Boncœur was smiling with kind approval on the fair face of her old friend's daughter. "We walked fast, I think, and Mr. Hereward brought us the shortest way."

"Mr. Hereward?" repeated the old lady, inquiringly, and with a slight tone of surprise.

"Yes—yes—our mutual friend. He undertook to show the girls and my maid—who was with them, of course—the way here," replied Lady Christina, airily. "I preceded them, to have my little chat with you, dear madame."

"Ah, indeed," said Mme. de Boncœur, though still seemingly a little perplexed.

"How tactless Aveline is!" thought her mother. "She blurts out everything. There is no need to tell every trifle;" while Mme. de Boncœur was secretly wondering if she had made some mistake in supposing the young man to be too decidedly poor to marry. "If it be so, Christine, English though she be, would never be so insane as to let him and that lovely girl—he so attractive too—be together in this intimate way."

Then the English ladies took their leave, the young girls naturally attracted to each other in spite of their shyness.

"Miss Verney is beautiful, and as good as she is beautiful, I feel sure," Modeste burst out, when alone with her grandmother. "How sorry I am mamma was not at home to see her! And the little one—not that she is very little, what long black legs and short skirts she has!—she too is charming, I am certain; there is a look of so much intelligence and mischief in her eyes. If only we were not so frightened, they of my French and I of their English!"

CHAPTER V.

MME. DE BONCŒUR'S Thursday evening receptions proved a great success. Among all the Paris gayeties in the midst of which the Verneys quickly found themselves, these so-called "unceremonious" little dances were what Aveline enjoyed the most. She soon came to feel at home with Modeste de Villers, and would have gladly become even more intimate with the intelligent and amiable French girl but for Lady Christina's repeated warnings to be careful.

"She is so very nice and sensible, mamma," Aveline ventured to remonstrate, "I am sure you would like all she says."

But Lady Christina shook her head.

"Madame de Boncœur's granddaughter is doubtless one of the best specimens of a French girl," she replied; "but I do not like their ways of looking at things. Has she ever chattered about being married, to you, Aveline?"

"N—no. She has alluded to it very slightly once or twice; but not in any definite way. Surely her grandmother and mother won't force her to marry any one she doesn't like, will they? It would make me so unhappy to think so—poor, sweet little Modeste."

"You need not pity her, my dear. French people look at things from a radically different point of view from ours," repeated Lady Christina. "And they are very wealthy—they can afford to let the girl be a little fanciful if she likes," she added, with a sincere enough sigh.

And the tiny cloud of misgiving, as regarded her friend's happiness, faded away from the girl's mind. It was not difficult in these days for Aveline Verney to see everything *couleur de rose*; all combined to make life appear to her a

better and more beautiful thing than she had ever pictured it. Her mother grew kinder and more "approving" every day; Aveline felt that she was admired wherever she went, more openly than had been the case in England—for French people are not so afraid as their neighbors of expressing their admiration, and many a graceful little compliment fell pleasantly on the father's and mother's ears, and the knowledge of her success gave to the naturally timid girl the confidence and animation she had lacked. Then the weather continued lovely, and at least two or three times a week Nigel Hereward repeated his rôle of cicerone, apparently to the perfect content of all concerned. And Aveline, whose training had left her in many ways inexperienced enough, despite her twenty years, lived in the present, and looked not to the future—there could be no risk in anything "mamma" sanctioned.

Perhaps of all the lookers-on, little Leo, with her sharp eyes, rendered still sharper by her affection for her sister, saw the most of the game and its dangers.

One Wednesday morning, about three weeks after the Verneys' arrival, a letter from Pau reached Lady Christina, the contents of which appeared to cause her the liveliest satisfaction.

"They will be here this evening!" she exclaimed. "I am so pleased. I must ask Madame de Boncœur for an invitation for them for to-morrow."

"Who will be here this evening?" asked Aveline. "The Roslands?"

"The Roslands!" repeated her mother, with more asperity than she had often shown of late; "my dear Aveline, are you asleep? I told you that the Roslands are very probably not coming now. No, of course I was speaking of the Ayrtons."

"I am sorry—about Amy, I mean," said Aveline. "If she had come I could have gone about with her, as you said, and it would not have been so tiring for you."

"Go about with Amy?" said Lady Christina, for the second time committing the solecism of repeating another person's words, "I never thought of such a thing. Amy is very little older than you, and much giddier. If I ever spoke of your going about with any one I must have meant the Ayrtons."

And her tone did not encourage Aveline to say more. That evening Mr. Verney and his daughter dined with some English friends at their hotel, and Lady Christina went off to welcome her dear Lady Ayrton. She appeared in excellent spirits the next morning, displaying peculiar interest on the subject of Aveline's dress for that evening.

"I thought my pale blue would do quite well," said the young girl. "My white—the new white—is quite dressy enough for a large ball."

But her mother decided in favor of "the new white." "We must get it done up again, or manage another, if there is any large ball soon," she said, philosophically, to her daughter's surprise.

"I promised to go to Sophia this afternoon," she went on. "I feel a little anxious about Sir Francis; he seemed very knocked up with the journey. But I hope she and her son will be able to come to the Rue de Touraine tonight."

"Oh, is *Mr.* Ayrton here?" said Aveline, opening her eyes, and her accent was not expressive of pleasure. "It will spoil Madame de Boncœur's parties if he comes to them," she said to herself.

"Of course *Mr.* Ayrton is here. It is not likely he would be away from them, especially with his father so ill. Their only child, too! Poor Sophia! she was saying to me this morning how she wished she had a daughter!"

"Yes," said Aveline, sympathizingly, "I wish she had. She seems so gentle and kind. I shall be glad to see her again."

"You have a good little heart of your own, my child,"

said her mother as she left the room, and Aveline reddened with pleasure.

"Leo and I are going with Mr. Hereward to the Invalides this afternoon, mamma," she ran after her to say.

"Very well—only don't tire yourself for this evening," her mother replied. "As Sophia was saying," she reflected, "we must arrange for Aveline to get into the way of going out with them as much as possible. I should think she will be glad to drive about instead of going sightseeing on foot with poor Mr. Hereward. But he has really been most obliging."

"She is prettiest in white after all," thought Nigel that evening, when, on entering the large salon at the Rue de Touraine, he caught sight of Miss Verney standing beside Mlle. de Villers. "Indeed, I'm afraid I think her prettiest in whatever she happens to have on."

In another moment Aveline passed him, dancing with M. de Bois-Hubert. She was smiling, and there was a little flush of unusual excitement on her face, for Modeste had just whispered to her that she wanted to talk to her quietly for a few minutes, she had something very important to tell her. Mr. Hereward waited till the dance was over, and then came forward to ask for one.

"You don't seem the least tired," he said, "though we really walked a good way to-day."

"It was so pleasant, I couldn't have felt tired," she said, brightly. "Then the next dance but one, if you like?" she added, as Modeste touched her arm.

"I want to tell you myself—grandmamma said I might," Mlle. de Villers began. "I dare say you can guess what it is, dear Aveline."

"You are going to be married!" Aveline exclaimed.

"Yes—at least that will come in due time. In the first place there will be of course *les fiançailles*, but I wanted you to know before it is formally announced. I count you quite like one of my best friends, though I have not known

you long. And Monsieur de Bois-Hubert—he likes and admires you so much. I hope we shall always be friends, dear Aveline."

"And you," said Aveline, returning her little caress, for they were in a corner where they could not be seen, "you are very happy—quite happy, dear Modeste, I hope?"

"Quite happy. Maurice is all I wanted. He is so good and kind, and clever too. And I know he truly cares for me. I can feel it somehow—he is so different from some others I have known. No, I have no misgiving; I feel sure I have done right."

"But," said Aveline, in surprise, "I did not know it was like that here—in France. I thought your parents simply told you whom you were to marry, and that you had to obey them."

"My parents gave their consent *first*, of course," said Modeste. "They have said on several occasions that this or that gentleman would not be disapproved of by them if I liked him. But then they left me free to decide. I should never have wished to marry any one they *disapproved* of, I hope. Indeed, I scarcely could have done so. I know that no gentlemen they do not think well of are allowed to become intimate with us. That is only a matter of course."

"I understand," said Aveline, quietly. "I think in some ways French girls are to be envied, Modeste—and in your case especially. I am *so* glad you are so happy. There is Mr. Hereward, he will be wondering what we are talking about."

"He is so nice—so well-bred and *sympathique*," said Modeste. "It was he that first told me about you, Aveline. Dear Aveline, I hope you will some day be as happy as I am," and she stood for a moment looking after her two young English friends as they walked away.

"I suppose it is not yet quite decided," she thought, "otherwise she would have told me."

"I think I know what Mademoiselle de Villers was telling you, if I am not very indiscreet," said Nigel, when they were too far off for Modeste to hear. "Her engagement to Monsieur de Bois-Hubert is soon to be announced?"

Aveline blushed and nodded.

"If you have guessed it, I have not told you," she said.

"I am very glad. He is a thorough good fellow," Mr. Hereward went on. "I think they will suit each other excellently."

"It all seems very happy," said Aveline with a tiny sigh, but Nigel overheard it.

"What are you sighing about?" he asked; but though the words were said half laughingly, something in the tone, still more perhaps in the expression of the eyes bent down upon her as she glanced up to answer his question, made her falter again and look down.

"What was it?" he said, "tell me;" and for an instant he yielded to the impulse strong upon him and laid his right hand tenderly on the little gloved one that lay on his left arm. "I don't like to hear you sigh, even ever so little, my—" but the last word and the "darling" that was following it were smothered ere they were spoken.

Aveline looked up again.

"I don't know," she answered, her voice trembling a very little; "I really and truly don't quite know, Mr. Hereward. It was a mixture of things. I can't put it in words."

"And if you could, would you tell me?" he asked, softly.

"That I know still less," she answered, smiling—more quickly recovering her self-control than he. For they were in the midst of the dancers by now; not far off, Lady Christina's well-shaped head was to be seen, the aigrette of feathers surmounting the coils of hair nodding, not in the breeze, but with her lively movements. And Aveline knew that it was never for very long that her mother's eyes lost sight of her. Yet why she shrunk from them

just now was another of the things she could scarcely have defined.

"Shall we not dance?" she said, after a moment's silence, half timidly.

Nigel obeyed her at once, but without speaking, and as he turned his face toward her she saw that he was very pale.

They went through the waltz with but the interchange of a few commonplace remarks. Aveline felt a vague curiosity to know what Mr. Hereward would do when it was over.

"Will he take me back to mamma?" she thought, "or will he go on with what he was saying?"

And Nigel himself, in a tumult of feeling, felt as if fate were leading him he knew not whither. The merest accident might have betrayed him into wild disregard of everything but the ardent love with which his heart was beating, his veins throbbing—into throwing to the winds all his prudent resolves, all his impossible unselfishness. For in Aveline's sweet eyes, in the tones of her faintly troubled voice, he had read the confession she did not know was there.

Fate came—as she always does—cold and pitiless this time, in the garb of Lady Christina, faultlessly equal to the occasion, pioneering through the crowd a stout elderly lady with a gentle, anxious face, and a thick-set, ruddy-hued young man, clumsy though not exactly ungentlemanlike in his bearing, with a good-natured awkward smile illuminating not unpleasantly his rather heavy features.

"Poor fellow," many would have felt inclined to say, seeing him thus for the first time, "not very much at home in a ball-room, but a good, honest, unaffected sort of young man;" and a slight movement of surprise might not improbably have followed the announcement that this simple-looking, not to say loutish youth was the only son and heir of the *very* rich Sir Francis Ayrton, a great *parti*,

but “so shy in ladies’ company, poor fellow,” many a mamma would have added, indulgently.

For Wilfred Ayrton, with Garthdean in prospect, Lady Christina’s honeyed accents in his ears—for he was of the sort to love flattery even while he saw through it—and an agreeable sense of general prosperity, was at his best. Nor did his geniality and amiability diminish when he caught sight of the tall, white-robed figure with the lovely face and coronet of golden hair, with the eyes which even he could see were beautiful—more beautiful than of yore, for the soul had awakened: to this Undine, too, had come her woman’s heritage of love and sorrow! And he who understood, who felt with her and for her through every fiber of his strong yet gentle manhood, must stand by silent, and, as he slowly realized the whole, despairing and bitterly self-reproachful; while Wilfred Ayrton muttered a coarse “By Jove! a deal handsomer than I fancied,” and, thickly smiling, held out his hand and pressed that of Aveline in his clumsy grasp.

A first flash of revelation seemed for a moment to turn Nigel giddy. Miss Verney had perforce withdrawn her arm, and he stood free. Before any one could notice him, he had moved away and disappeared in the little crowd.

“I couldn’t have touched that fellow’s paw—not to save my life. If *that* is what is to be!” he groaned. “My sweet, innocent Aveline—and if I have made it worse for her! God forbid—I must at least pull up now and undo the mischief if I can. But her mother—she must know what he is, surely. How can she think of it?

And Aveline stood smiling, happy still; she could afford to smile and be cordial to her mother’s friends to-night, though she shrunk somewhat, and inwardly laughed at herself for so doing, from resigning to Mr. Ayrton’s touch the hand which so recently had received Nigel’s tender little caress.

“Is she not looking well—this child of mine, dear

Sophia?" said Lady Christina, effusively. "I have so looked forward to this meeting again."

"You are, indeed, a most enviable mother," said gentle Lady Ayrton. "I should hardly have known you again, dear Aveline. Can you have grown? You seem to me to have done so; you have more color than formerly, in any case."

"I am enjoying myself so much in Paris; I suppose that makes me look particularly well," said Aveline, brightly. "And now mamma will enjoy *herself* doubly. I think she has been counting the days for you to come."

"It will be delightful to be here together," Lady Ayrton replied. "Your mother has promised to let you be half my daughter here. I am counting upon you to go shopping, and I don't know all what, with me."

"Then you'll let me off duty a bit, I hope, my lady," said Mr. Ayrton, speaking for the first time. "It will be very good-natured of Miss Verney, I'm sure—yet I'm by no means certain that I shall want to be let off," and he laughed rather noisily at his own wit.

Aveline glanced up at him in some surprise. But she could not help smiling at his broad, ruddy face, and the expression of satisfaction which she caught sight of in Lady Ayrton's eyes helped to turn the scale in their favor.

"Poor thing," she thought. "It is touching to see how proud his mother is of him, though he is so clumsy and awkward. I think he is improved; he looks much better-tempered than he used to, and it is only kind to make the best of him, for her sake."

So Aveline smiled again, more graciously this time, at Mr. Ayrton's flattering speech.

"Aveline will enjoy of all things going about with you," said Lady Christina. "Poor child, she has not seen as much of Paris as I should have wished. You see I am so busy, and so easily tired," she added, appealingly, to Lady Ayrton.

"Oh, but, mamma, we have seen a good deal," whispered Aveline; "you forget how much Leo and I have been about with Mr. Hereward."

"Ah, yes," said her mother, though she did not seem particularly grateful for the reminder. "I could not coop them up altogether, so they have seen a few of the regular lions with different friends. Among them young Hereward has been very obliging, poor fellow."

"You mean Nigel Hereward, I suppose?" said Lady Ayrton. "He is still here, I know. I heard from his step-sister, Mrs. Trevine, the other day. Yes, we used to know him."

"Know Hereward—I should think so. We were at school together; got into some scrapes together, if I'm not mistaken," said Wilfred, laughing again.

His mother glanced at him with a look almost of disgust. But this time her glance was unperceived by Miss Verney. Mr. Ayrton's tone struck her disagreeably, nevertheless; she disliked to hear Nigel's name on his lips.

"I hope Sir Francis Ayrton is pretty well?" she said, gently.

"Much better to-day, thank you. When you come to me to-morrow, as I hope you will, he will be delighted to see you," replied Lady Ayrton. "He has not forgotten you, I assure you."

"I remember him too, quite well," said Aveline, "though I think I have not seen him since I was a little girl. He was so kind to my brothers and me."

Then the elder ladies began to find out that they were tired and would like to sit down. Mr. Ayrton did not dance, Aveline was thankful to hear, though it was bad enough to have to accept his arm when he offered to take her to get an ice. Still she was not sorry to go to the dining-room where the refreshments were to be had, thinking that on the way she might, perhaps, catch sight of Mr. Hereward, whose defection she had become aware of some

time ago. She had promised him another dance—the next to the one just ending—and she glanced about with a slight dread of his not finding her.

He was not to be seen, however. She answered at random to Mr. Ayrton's attempts at making himself agreeable, but she smiled so amiably that he did not perceive her abstraction, and told his mother afterward, with unusual amiability, that things "couldn't be getting on better." But the evening was over for Aveline when, a few moments after leaving the dancing-room, some one touched her gently on the arm, and turning she saw M. de Bois-Hubert. Her face fell a little, as the quick-witted Frenchman was not slow to perceive. He hastened, so far as he could, to reassure her.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "my friend Mr. Hereward asked me to make his excuses for him. He was obliged to leave early—he was most distressed—most deeply distressed, but counted on your indulgence."

"Thank you," said Aveline; "thank you very much. It is not of the least consequence; we shall be leaving, ourselves, immediately."

She tried to smile, but the effort was not very successful. "What an innocent child she is!" thought Modeste's *fiancé*. Poor little thing—what can be the matter? Nothing going wrong, I hope. Hereward did not seem very happy either." For his own prospects predisposed him to take a peculiar interest in the affairs of his and Modeste's friends.

"Hate Frenchmen—set of affected monkeys, the whole lot of them. Don't you think so, Miss Verney?" said Mr. Ayrton, engagingly.

And Aveline smiled again, and said, "Yes, certainly."

"Are you tired, my love?" asked her mother, when they found themselves in the carriage, driving home. For Aveline's silence struck her. "Such a pleasant evening."

"Yes, very;—no, thank you, I am only a little sleepy," the girl answered. Her mother's kindness touched her.

"If she had always been like that," thought Aveline.
"I wish—I wish I could tell her everything I feel."

"You have been walking too much," said Lady Christina, "but now you will have more driving. To-morrow you will have a nice day with Lady Ayrton. She is coming to fetch you at twelve."

"Yes," said Aveline, indifferently. To-morrow was not one of "Mr. Hereward's days," as she and Leo had got into the way of calling them. She knew he was to be very busy till late; he had said so. On Saturday or Sunday perhaps, she might see him again, and doubtless he would explain the reason of his sudden disappearance. So Friday was spent pleasantly enough, in driving and shopping with her mother's friends. Lady Ayrton she felt it impossible not to like, so gentle and affectionate was she. And poor Sir Francis—how ill he looked! The girl's kind heart went out to him, for Sir Francis could be very charming still when he chose, and his clever, caustic little speeches, modified for her benefit, struck her as amusing in the extreme.

"I would like them both," she told Leo that evening, "I do like them—if only it were not for the son."

"Is he so very horrid?" asked Leo, sympathizingly.

"No, I really don't think he is as bad as I expected. He is only very stupid and heavy, and I can't help feeling sorry for him when his father snaps at him so, though he doesn't seem to see it. He must be very good-natured, and he is nice to his mother. It was he that gave me these lovely flowers; and Aveline's eyes rested admiringly on some exquisite roses Leo had been helping her to arrange.

But she was less disposed to feel amiably toward the Ayrton family the next day, when there came a note asking her to accompany the mother and son to an exhibition of paintings that afternoon and to return to tea.

"I don't think I can go," she began; "I was out all yesterday, and—"

"Of course you can go," interrupted Lady Christina, de-

cidedly. “I am delighted for you to see those pictures, and the entrance is ten francs each. I really can’t afford that kind of thing for ourselves”—and Aveline had not the moral courage to say more. But she did what she could.

“Leo,” she said to her sister, “I feel certain Mr. Hereward will call to-day. *Try* to see him and tell him I *had* to go out; you may say you knew I didn’t want to go. And try to plan for us to go somewhere else with him next week.”

Leo nodded sagaciously; and somewhat less reluctantly Aveline joined Lady Ayrton when the summons came.

The picture exhibition was crowded. It took time and patience to get near enough to see. And then Lady Ayrton had cards to leave at a house at some little distance. It was rather late before they got back to the Hôtel d’Anvers.

“You will be glad of a cup of tea, my dear child,” said Lady Ayrton, as they made their way upstairs to her drawing-room; “and poor Sir Francis will have begun to despair of us. Wilfred, order tea at once, please.”

Mr. Ayrton turned to obey, and the ladies went on by themselves. Voices reached them as the door opened—Sir Francis’s sounding more interested and cheerful than usual, and another. Whose was the tall figure that rose from the side of the invalid’s couch and came forward to meet them? For a moment Aveline was too surprised to take in the fact of his presence—then a thought went quickly through her. “Can Leo have told him where I was? Clever little Leo!” and her smile was very sweet and bright as she shook hands.

“I have had a most agreeable half hour, you will be delighted to hear, my dear Sophia,” said Sir Francis, with his peculiar accent of latent irony. “Mr. Hereward has been so truly kind as to sit listening for that length of time to an old invalid’s grumbling and fancies. Nay, I

mean what I say,"' he went on; " the Fates have been really amiable to me since I came here. Yesterday Miss Verney with her gracious sympathy, to-day another old friend equally patient, and now Miss Verney again. But what has become of my stock consolation, the staff of my old age and weakness, my dearly beloved son?"'

" He stayed down-stairs to order tea, Francis, that is all," said his wife, rather shortly. " I am so glad to see you, Mr. Hereward," she went on, turning to Nigel. " I suppose you knew of our coming through Mrs. Trevine."

" Yes," he replied, " my sister mentioned it to me; but I also knew you were coming from Lady Christina Verney."

" Ah, of course; you and they are old friends. I don't need to introduce Mr. Hereward to you, Miss Verney," said Sir Francis, with one of his keen glances at the two as they stood together near him.

" Oh, no," said Aveline, smiling. " That would be very unnecessary. Mr. Hereward has been our guide here. He has shown my little sister and me nearly all we have seen of Paris," she said.

" Yes," said Nigel, with an involuntary glance at her—a glance which did not escape Sir Francis—" we have had some very happy days here."

At that moment Mr. Ayrton entered the room and came up to the group.

" Halloo, Hereward," he said, holding out his hand with what he meant to be easy cordiality, but which looked more like swagger, " how are you? Some time since we've met. Tea's on its way upstairs all right, my lady."

Nigel shook hands quietly.

A few moments later, in the little bustle of tea-making and distributing, he found himself beside Aveline and out of the immediate hearing of the Ayrtons.

" I hope you did not think me very rude for running away so abruptly the other evening," he said, softly. " I

really could not help it—I had important letters to write, and I did not know it was so late."

"Monsieur de Bois-Hubert gave me your message," said Aveline. "Have you been at our house this afternoon, Mr. Hereward?" she went on, eagerly.

"Yes," he said—but that was all, and his tone seemed to the girl somewhat melancholy. A quick instinct of impending trouble thrilled through her, but she repelled it.

"Can not we arrange for some more sight-seeing next week? Leo does so look forward to it," she said, blushing a little at her own boldness.

"Leo is not the only one who has looked forward to it," he said, gently. "I am not a child now, but I can assure you I have never enjoyed anything as much before. I shall always remember it."

"Why do you speak in that way," asked Aveline, abruptly—"as if it had come to an end?"

"Because—" he began, and then stopped. "By the bye, Miss Verney," he went on, "I wanted to tell you I had no idea the Ayrtons," dropping his voice, "were such friends of yours when I spoke of them the other day."

"They are only old friends of mamma's," said Aveline. "I thought you were a little hard on—on the son," she said, fearful of being overheard.

Mr. Hereward looked up—at that moment Wilfred was helping his mother at the tea-table; for Lady Ayrton insisted on pouring it out herself in regular English fashion, even at a Paris hotel. He looked good-natured and cheery; of late he had decidedly been at his best.

"Perhaps he *is* improved," Nigel allowed.

"But," said Aveline, "I want to talk about our sight-seeing."

Mr. Hereward turned to her with an indescribable expression in his eyes.

"I am going away," he said. "I have to leave next week."

Aveline *felt* herself growing pale. She made a tremendous effort.

"I must help Lady Ayrton with the tea," she said through the trembling of her voice, "men never understand such things;" and she got up from her chair and went forward to the table, grasping it tightly as she stood beside it.

CHAPTER VI.

LEONORA was watching anxiously for her sister when the latter went home. Lady Christina was busy in her own rooms, so the two girls were alone for a little.

"He came, Avé," said Leo, eagerly. "I was practicing in the little drawing-room, and mamma wanted something fetched, so she called me in. I told him—just as you said."

"Yes, dear," said Aveline, wearily, sitting down by the side of the bed and leaning her head on it.

"What's the matter, Avé, dear? You look so white," said the young girl, anxiously.

"Did you tell him where I had gone?"

"Yes, of course, he was rather *funny*, I thought. He only smiled when I asked him about going to see some other places, and said he wished we could. But he didn't fix anything, and he had to speak to mamma. Some other people came in."

"He couldn't fix anything. He's going away," said Aveline.

"Oh, Avé!" exclaimed Leo. "Did you see him—did he tell you? Perhaps it's nonsense."

"No, no. It's quite true. I saw him. He came to call at the Ayrtons! Leo," Aveline went on, impressively, "do you remember what I said that evening at home, when we were first talking of coming to Paris—that I almost wished Mr. Hereward were not to be here?"

"Yes," said Leo, "I remember."

"Well," said Aveline, "I wish it more than ever—I mean I wish he hadn't been here. Oh, how I wish it!"

"But why?" asked the child. "Perhaps he can't help going away; perhaps he'll come back soon. You seem as unhappy as if—"

"As if what?"

"As if you thought he didn't care for you," said Leo, softly, "and I am sure he does."

Aveline's face relaxed.

"I don't know," she said. "I had begun to have a most horrible feeling that he *despised* me—no, not exactly that—he is too kind—but that he pitied me, that he thinks I care for *him*, and that he'd better go away. Oh, Leo!"

"But you caring for him—I mean his seeing you did—needn't prevent his caring for you," said the little girl, simply. "Don't work yourself up so about it, Avé. I think he's very good and kind and nice, too nice to have any feelings not *quite* nice to you. And he may *have* to go away."

Aveline sat up, and began to take off her hat.

"I could bear anything if I were sure he didn't at all *despise* me—it's the only word," she said. Then, as her sister crept nearer her, "Kiss me, Leo," she said. "Oh, when you are grown up I do *hope* I shall be able to keep you from being unhappy!"

The next few days passed in a feverish hope that she should see Mr. Hereward before he left, and that *something*—she knew not what—might be said by him to lessen the pain she was suffering. She scarcely dared go out, and yet it was impossible to stay at home without risking Lady Christina's suspicions that something was the matter. For every day brought invitations and proposals for all sorts of expeditions from the Ayrtons—more often for Aveline alone than for the rest of the Verney party. And on the whole, Aveline felt more at ease with gentle, caressing

Lady Ayrton than within reach of her mother's sharp eyes. Nor was Mr. Ayrton offensive to her. She grew accustomed to his rough, rather boorish manner, looking upon him as a somewhat unmannerly but honest dog, whom it was easy to keep in good-humor by a pat or a smile, and concerning whom no further consideration was necessary. And she was too self-absorbed to notice how invariably he made one of their expeditions; nay, more, how often Lady Ayrton managed to leave her to his escort, and seemed to take it for granted that the two young people were the best of friends. For he would ramble on for half an hour at a time about the only subjects he was conversant with at all fit for a young lady's hearing, his horses and dogs, his hunting and shooting, without observing how heedless were Aveline's ears, how superficial her little ejaculations of interest and her well-bred smiles.

What she feared came to pass. One afternoon, when Lady Ayrton had "dropped" her at their own door, and Aveline, fagged and anxious, came slowly into the drawing-room, her mother looked up.

"Such a pity you weren't in five minutes sooner, my love," she said. "Mr. Hereward has just gone—he waited to see you to say good-bye—he is off to England on leave to-morrow, and hardly expects to return here. He may very probably be sent to Rome. I thanked him, and all that, poor fellow—he has been most good-natured."

"Yes," was all Aveline could say. Something in her voice made her mother look up. The girl's face was very pale.

"What can be the matter with her?" thought Lady Christina. "Surely that clumsy Wilfred hasn't spoiled everything by proposing to her all of a sudden? Sophia promised me there should be nothing premature."

"Was Mr. Ayrton with you to-day?" she went on.
"You look very tired, my dear."

"I am tired," said Aveline. "No, Mr. Ayrton didn't

come. His mother *is* so kind. I am sorry to have missed Mr. Hereward," she went on, steadily.

"She is only tired," thought Lady Christina, and she rang for tea—an extra indulgence, for she economized in some particulars by doing at Rome as the Romans do, and eschewing afternoon tea in Paris except on her reception days.

"Mamma," said Aveline, grateful in two senses for the tea, "to-morrow is the day you said I might spend with Modeste. I told Lady Ayrton I could not go out with her, but she asked me to go to the *Français* with them in the evening. She said there was some piece you would like to see. Mamma, I should like to go to Modeste."

Why the idea of Modeste seemed congenial to her she did not know—Modeste so happy, she so *very* miserable! Perhaps it was that Modeste knew "him" and always spoke so nicely of him. Modeste, too, would ask no questions. "She will be sorry for me without my needing to tell her why," thought Aveline.

Lady Christina hesitated.

"Very well, my dear, I have objection. Only, of course, you will be careful. Modeste's head will be full of her *trousseau* now that the marriage is so soon to be announced." It would do Aveline no harm to think a little more of such things, she reflected.

"Thank you, mamma," and Aveline rose to go.

"Wait a moment, my dear. It is very gratifying to me to see how fond Lady Ayrton is of you, Aveline. And Sir Francis, too; he was speaking so very nicely of you to me."

"They are both very kind. I like them both."

"And," Lady Christina went on—"I think it right to allude to this to you, Aveline; you are no longer a child—and your father, too, thought I should tell you of it. It is not *only* Sir Francis and Lady Ayrton who are fond of you. I think—nay, I am sure—that Mr. Ayrton admires you even more than they do."

Aveline looked at her mother with a little smile. Sad as she was, she could not help smiling at the solemnity with which Lady Christina made the announcement. What did it matter?

"Well, mamma, dear, and if he does"—she was beginning, but a sudden idea struck her. "Oh, I see—you are afraid of—of the poor man getting any nonsense in his head, and that it might be uncomfortable, as they are such old friends. I will be very careful, but indeed I don't think I have done anything that you could blame me for."

"Blame you—I have no thought of blaming you. I don't understand you, my dear."

"I mean that I have neither sought nor encouraged his admiration," said Aveline.

"But I should not blame you if—if, to a certain extent only, of course," said Lady Christina, faltering a little, "you had done so. You must know that such a marriage does not come in a girl's way every day."

Aveline grew white with amazement and—something almost approaching horror.

"Mamma," she said, "you can't mean that you would like me to marry that—that—And papa, you can't say *he* would like it."

"Calm yourself, Aveline," said her mother, retaining her own self-control by a great effort. It would ruin all for her to get angry. "It is natural for you to feel startled at first. Of course, my dear, we should never wish you to do what *you* did not like. Your father only agreed with me that the thing should be alluded to—suggested to you. He would never—nor would I—lay the weight on what *we* wish, on such a subject."

Poor Mr. Verney! All he had said or done was to express considerable incredulity when his wife hinted that Mr. Ayrton's evident admiration of Aveline did not seem displeasing to the girl, and to insist that his daughter should not be in any way involved, blindfold as it were, in

unconscious or unintended acceptance of the young man's attentions.

"Aveline is such a baby in some ways," he said, "I insist upon your warning her, Christina; or else I shall do it myself. I can not believe she can like that loutish fellow. Just compare him with Hereward, for instance. If it had been he, now."

"Nigel Hereward!" exclaimed Lady Christina. "What are you thinking of, my dear Owen? He has nothing to marry on, and no prospects. Aveline is far too sensible to dream of such a thing."

"I hope she is," replied Mr. Verney, not sorry to believe it must be so. Such matters were Christina's business, not his, and he supposed she knew what she was about. And then, as was his habit, he dismissed the subject from his mind. But his words had not been without their effect.

Aveline grew quiet again.

"Thank you, mamma. I knew you would never force me to anything utterly distasteful to me," she said. "Still, I would so much rather you and papa should feel *with* me about everything."

"We can but do our best, my dear, and putting old heads on young shoulders does not come within that, I fear," said Lady Christina, somewhat bitterly. "I have tried to bring you up sensibly, Aveline; but still, I suppose, you can not realize that life is not all sentiment. Hard, practical matters must be considered," she added, with a sigh.

Her face seemed fagged and care-worn. Aveline, overstrung and weakened by all she had gone through, felt a rush of pity as she looked at it. It was all she could do to prevent herself bursting into tears.

"Poor mamma!" she said, stooping to kiss her as she went. In her own room the tears did come, fast and blindingly.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she sobbed. "Life is very, very difficult."

She spent the next day at the Rue de Touraine. All the three ladies there received her with open arms. But Mme. de Boncœur lifted her hands in dismay when she first saw her.

"My child, my child!" she exclaimed, "what have they been doing to you? You look so ill, so white, and I could almost fancy you have grown thinner since last Thursday. Be very good to her, Modeste," as her granddaughter was taking Aveline off to her own quarters.

"You do look ill, dear Aveline," Mlle. de Villers said, sympathizingly, "and last Thursday evening you looked so bright and beautiful."

"I am not ill, thank you," Aveline replied, "but I have been troubled since I saw you. Indeed I am so still."

Modeste stroked the hand which she was holding in hers, and looked at Aveline, hesitatingly.

"I can't think what it is," she said. "I—I thought, and so did Maurice, that all looked so bright for you. But if I were mistaken—your parents would never wish you to marry any one if you do not want."

"No," said Aveline, "it isn't that."

"I thought you *did* care for him," said Modeste.

Aveline sighed.

"I can't explain," she said. "And mamma—I think it is best not to say anything—mamma would not like it."

"Naturally," said Modeste. "These things are best never discussed except with our mothers. Forgive me, dear, if I was indiscreet. But do not make yourself so unhappy, Aveline. If something has not suited this time—well, it is often so. I was sorry myself when I felt I could not like some one grandmother liked. But how happy I am now. There are so many things to consider in marriage, you see. Of course our parents have to consider a

great deal besides what *we* think of," added the practical little French girl.

"Yes," said Aveline, "that is just it. How far *are* those things to be considered? How far *may* we consider our part of it, as you call it?"

Modeste shook her head.

"I can't say, unless I knew all; and that it would neither be right for you to tell nor for me to listen to," she said. "Our parents are the only ones to consult."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Aveline," sighing. "But things are so different. My parents have so much anxiety with their large family, and you know we are not rich, Modeste."

Mlle. de Villers shook her head sagely.

"I know," she said. "And you must feel that you would do *anything* to please them."

"I feel, at least, that it would be cruel to displease or disappoint them," Aveline agreed. "Now we have talked enough about *me*—tell me something about yourself, Modeste."

"Yourself," of course, by this time, meant Maurice de Bois-Hubert, his tastes and opinions, his family and home, and the whole prospects and intentions of the young *fiancées*. The proposed *trousseau*, too, as Lady Christina had prophesied, came in for some share of discussion. So the day passed, and Aveline felt, to some extent, soothed by Modeste's affection. Nigel's name was only once mentioned.

"Did you see Mr. Hereward before he went away? I suppose he called to say good-bye?" asked Aveline.

"Yes, he called the other day, but we were not at home," Modeste replied. "He has not gone away for long, has he?"

"I think he is not coming back any more," said Aveline, and Modeste raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"But that is not certain, is it?" she said. "I think my

grandmother would have known. He is a great friend of hers."

That "not certain" sent Aveline home more cheered than by all the kindnesses her friends showered upon her.

"Grandmamma," said Modeste, when they were alone that evening, "I don't understand as much about English people's ways as you do, but I don't think they arrange some things very well."

"What do you know about it, my little girl?" said Mme. de Boncœur, amused. "What things?"

"I don't think Aveline should be so unhappy," said Modeste, answering indirectly. "Grandmamma, she says Monsieur Hereward has gone away for always."

The old lady looked troubled.

"Indeed," she said, "I did not know that. I do not understand it, my child. But if it be that he is too poor, or some difficulty of that kind—for I am sure he cares for her—I shall indeed think that her mother has been much to blame. She," she went on as if speaking to herself, "who was indirectly accusing us—us French parents—of heartless disregard of our children's feelings."

Aveline went to the *Français* that evening with Lady Ayrton and her son. The piece was a serious one, and as much above Mr. Ayrton's comprehension as it was contrary to his taste. After vainly endeavoring to stifle his yawns, he turned to Aveline in hopes of finding sympathy.

"I can't stand this, 'pon my soul—can you, Miss Verney?" he said, with an expression of suffering which almost made her laugh. "My French does well enough when it's a play with any common-sense, but I can't make head or tail of this—'pon my soul, I can't."

"I'm very sorry for you, Mr. Ayrton," said Aveline. "I find it very interesting—and you must allow the acting is good."

He looked rather discomfited.

"You're so con—you're so very good-natured, Miss

Verney," he began, edging rather nearer to her. " You wouldn't think it rude of me to cut this, would you? I'll be back in time to take you home. You'll make it right with my lady?"

" Very well," said Aveline, glad to be left in peace, whereupon he left the box with a nod.

" Has Wilfred gone?" asked Lady Ayrton, suddenly awaking to the fact.

" He told me to say he would return to take us home. He found the piece very dull, I'm afraid," said Miss Verney, with a smile.

Lady Ayrton sighed a little.

" Poor Wilfred," she said. " He is not at all intellectual, Aveline—not like Sir Francis."

" Intellect is not everything, however, Lady Ayrton," said Aveline, consolingly. " He may be a good, kind son, and a great comfort to you without being intellectual."

His mother smiled with pleasure, yet her conscience smote her a little as she replied, " True, my dear—and I think, yes, I really think, under good influence he might make a kind husband. It would be delightful for his father and me if he married as we wish."

" Yes," said Aveline, dreamily, hardly hearing what was said. Her mind was running on the words in which Modeste had suggested more comfort than she knew—" perhaps it is not certain."

But the days passed, and no allusion was made to Mr. Hereward's possible return. And a vague, scarcely acknowledged hope that " he might write " faded gradually away. Aveline saw but little of her father at that time, less than in England, but on Sunday, on their way to church, Mr. Verney, who was walking alone with her, startled her by a sudden observation.

" You are not looking well, Avé. And when we first came over you were full of life and spirits."

" I am not ill, papa, thank you," she replied. " Per-

haps there was some excitement when we first came—the change and the novelty and all—that made me seem livelier than usual. You know it is my nature to be quiet—like you, papa.”

He gave her one of his glances from under his rough eyebrows.

“Are you beginning to find out that life is not such an easy business, poor child?” he said, with a kind of abrupt tenderness. “Ah, well, I suppose it can’t be helped,” and he sighed.

“Papa dear, what are you sighing for? Are you troubled about things?” said Aveline.

“Well, yes, my dear, I can’t say that things are going smoothly just now. I’m afraid this Paris business has been a mistake. It is costing more than we expected, and the London house has not let. Then I am bothered about Chris, Avé. It is evident he’ll never pass his examination straight from school. I must send him to a crammer’s for a year, and it’s a very expensive business. And next year there will be Arthur—”

“Yes,” said Aveline, “it is hard. I wish I could do anything to help you, papa.”

“Try and get back your spirits, my dear. I don’t like to see you looking pale and dull.”

They were at the church door by now—there was no time for more.

Coming out, they were joined by Lady Ayrton and her son. The former attached herself to Mr. Verney.

“I want you to use your influence to help me in a little scheme I have set my heart upon, dear Mr. Verney,” she began with her soft, caressing manner. “Aveline is not looking well—”

“No,” said her father, “that is true.”

“I want to take her off with us to Fontainebleau for a few days,” said Lady Ayrton; “we are going there on Wednesday or Thursday. There are some people staying

there whom we know, and if it keeps fine we could have some picnics and nice drives. Will you let Aveline come?"

"I have no objection, if the child would like it. I dare say it would do her good. But you must speak to Christina," he replied. Some vague misgiving came over him as he caught sight of Mr. Ayrton's well-dressed, groom-like figure at Aveline's side in front of them.

"She'd never look at him, and Christina has warned her. And the mother's a good soul. What a pity the son is what he is! It would have been a safe future for her."

Aveline had got to the stage of hope deferred when it mattered very little to her where or with whom she was. She liked Lady Ayrton's gentleness, and she dreaded her mother's sharp eyes. So she made no objection, even faintly expressed some pleasure at the idea of going to Fontainebleau.

She stayed there a week, and came home looking more like herself. The afternoon of her return she sought her mother in her own room, where Lady Christina had established her davenport and neatly arranged bills and papers as at home.

"Mamma," she began, "if you are not busy—"

"I am rather busy, my dear—when am I not? But if you want to speak to me, I can attend to you."

A faint flutter of hope made itself felt in the maternal breast. Could Aveline have "anything to tell"? She did not look elated or excited, certainly, as she stood there, her fingers idly playing with the tassel of her parasol, her blue eyes gazing half-dreamily out of the open window, through which a little breeze, fluttering softly, waved the clustering hair on her forehead—a fair picture, with her quiet face and serious mouth, for a mother to gaze upon, though too subdued, too grave for her twenty years.

"She is so unlike other girls," thought Lady Christina. "One can never judge of her."

And "Well, Aveline?" she said, aloud.

"I only wanted to tell you, mamma," Aveline replied—"I thought it was right you should know. What you once hinted at—about the Ayrtons, about Mr. Ayrton—has come true. At Fontainebleau he asked me to marry him."

Lady Christina gasped with anxiety.

"And—you—you replied?"

"I told him, of course, I did not care for him in the least," said Aveline. "But I told it him gently—as gently and kindly as I could. I felt sorry for him, mamma. I should not have expected I would, but I did. I think he did care, more than I thought him capable of, poor man, so I said it as kindly as I could. So I hope it will cause no uncomfortable feeling with his mother."

She spoke with perfect composure, whereas as she went on speaking Lady Christina's suspense and excitement rose to almost boiling point.

"You told him you did not care for him? Do you mean—oh, no, you *can't* mean that you refused him, Aveline? You said you would try to learn to care for him—you held out some hope?"

"What hope could I hold out, mamma, if I did not care for him?" replied the girl, with a tone of calm reproach infinitely irritating to her mother.

Lady Christina moved away—scalding tears rose to her eyes—she felt choking.

"Oh, Aveline," she said, "you break my heart!"

"Mamma!" exclaimed her daughter.

"Yes, you do. To refuse such a marriage—such a home, such prospects as you would have, all for a piece of sentimental fancy. You allow that you were sorry for him, that you believe in his sincerity; you have said a dozen times that you thought him kind-hearted and honest, only not clever; you are very fond of his father and mother; what would you have? There is something in your mind that you have not told me. Can it be, is it possi-

ble that you have been cherishing any groundless nonsense about any one else? If so, the sooner you discard it the better. Tell me the truth, Aveline."

"Mamma," said Aveline, growing very pale, "what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," replied Lady Christina, speaking more calmly; "I mean Mr. Hereward. You must have known he was not what is called 'a marrying man,' that he is far too poor to marry."

"I knew he was poor—at least not rich," said Aveline. "But papa was not rich when you married *him*, mamma. People do marry without being rich."

"Yes, and live to repent it. I am not referring to my own case—it was not so rash at the time; for things might and should have turned out better. But Mr. Hereward is decidedly *poor*—completely and entirely out of the question, and with no prospects. And even more than that—"

"What, mamma?"

"If you were not such a very childish girl you would have seen he was not the sort of a man for a girl to think of, except as a pleasant partner. He goes everywhere when he is in England, knows every one, and is a great favorite. He is not exactly a flirt; but everybody knows his attentions mean nothing, *can not* mean anything. Why, only last week I heard of him as amusing himself tremendously somewhere or other. What girl or lady was it he was so devoted to?—I can't remember. I will look for the letter."

"No," said Aveline, "you need not."

"If I had had any *idea* you were so silly," her mother went on, "I would not have asked him here so much, or let you see him. But I thought you had more sense—you might never have lived out of a village, Aveline! I can not bear to think of the young man having perhaps *seen* how silly you were. He will have thought you too absurd—he always talks so openly about his position—he would

regret such a foolish misunderstanding of his ordinary friendliness to every pretty girl, more than any one! But I must say it is not what I expected of *my* daughter."

"Mamma," began Aveline, but her lips were dry and parched; it seemed as if her words could not pass them—
"Mamma, you have said enough. Neither Mr. Hereward nor any man shall have reason either to despise or pity me. I only ask you one thing—never let this subject be named again."

"I am sure *I* have no wish ever to revert to it," said Lady Christina. And then, even *she* felt she had done and said enough for one morning.

A week later Aveline returned from an afternoon spent with Lady Ayrton, and walked straight into the drawing-room, where her mother was sitting alone.

"I want to tell you, mamma," she said, "that Mr. Ayrton has to-day repeated his offer to me—and I have accepted him."

"My good child—my sweet Aveline," exclaimed Lady Christina, rapturously. But the cheeks which received the kisses she showered upon them were as cold as ice.

CHAPTER VII.

No rose—so at least says the proverb, and in so saying serves the purpose of a proverb's existence, to which strict veracity is not essential—no rose, we are told, is without its thorn—in other words, no joy is without its drawback. And so Lady Christina found to her cost in the days which immediately succeeded Aveline's acceptance of Mr. Ayrton's suit. It was rather hard upon her, poor woman!—she was so ready, so anxious to rejoice, so brimming over with satisfaction and approval, so effusively delighted with her daughter—it surely was hard upon her that Aveline, the meek, the appealing, who hitherto had been exagger-

atedly grateful for any crumb of maternal favor, should suddenly incase herself in a suit of invisible but most efficient armor, on whose smooth, cold surface it was impossible to make any impression.

"She has always been a queer, tiresome girl," said the mother to herself, when a few days' persistence in this attitude on Aveline's part had at last worn out her patience, to the extent at least of owning to herself the girl's "tiresomeness." "I am sure, if it were not that we are so poor, and the future, with such a family, so uncertain, I would really have left Aveline to manage her own affairs, and be an old maid if she chose. For, as to marrying a man like Nigel Hereward, without a penny, so to speak, there is happily no chance of that—men have more sense nowadays, however silly girls are. And of course he never dreamed of anything serious. But small thanks, truly, one gets in this world for doing one's duty, even from one's children!"

There was perhaps some slight consolation in fancying herself a martyr; and even had it been still slighter, it was all that Lady Christina was likely to get from any quarter. For to every one save her mother Aveline was more charming than she had ever been before, so that the poor lady had to listen with a smiling countenance to praises of her daughter which found but faint echo in her heart, though she would have died rather than allow this to be seen. Even with Aveline herself she never took off the mask or permitted her real vexation to appear. An underlying, undefined, though not indefinable instinct warned her that it was best so—she would avoid the thin ice without seeming to have the faintest suspicion of its existence—she would skate along cheerily with apparently perfect satisfaction that the chief person concerned could not be enjoying herself more. And in this she was wise; it was in fact the only position consistently open to her.

For even Mr. Verney seemed just now to have got on to

the sunshiny side of the road with all the others in some incomprehensible and rather irritating way. Only Lady Christina was left out in the cold. *Noblesse oblige*, however; she would bear it and grin, and nobody should suppose she had anything to bear. Even when, as happened more than once, she detected some little outward expression of affection or sympathy pass between the father and daughter, when Aveline slipped her hand inside Mr. Verney's arm, or he patted her soft fair head when he left them in the morning, Lady Christina tried to feel delighted.

"He might have taken it into his head to oppose it—it is really fortunate that he is reasonable enough to see the advantages of it. But all the same he might give *some* little credit where credit is due." This last with the fine inconsistency of the British matron, who, while secretly congratulating herself on the success of her wise diplomacy, is at the same moment ready—and, incredible as it may seem, ready in all honesty—to express her conviction that "made marriages" are immoral, and that interference in such matters is terribly dangerous.

She had not been present at the little scene between her husband and child the very evening on which Aveline's engagement was announced, nor had she heard what passed.

"Let me tell papa myself, please," had been Aveline's only request; and the girl had done so. Lady Christina made some excuse for leaving them alone in the dining-room after dinner, and Aveline then told her tale.

"Papa," she said, quietly, but without the freezing coldness of manner which had roused her mother's indignation, "Papa, I have something to tell you. Mr. Ayrton asked me to-day to marry him, and I have accepted him. He is coming to see you to-morrow, and I think Sir Francis Ayrton will want you to go to see him, as he can't come here."

Mr. Verney sat for a moment or two in absolute silence.

"Papa," said Aveline again, with a kind of fear or apprehension in her voice.

Then he turned round and looked her full in the face. "Avé," he said, and the anxious look in his eyes made him seem almost haggard—"Avé, I don't understand. There has been some question of this before—has there not? Your mother told me something, vaguely, a few days ago. She said you couldn't make up your mind, and I took that to mean you didn't like the—Mr. Ayrton, but that you wanted to get out of it quietly, not to vex your mother. And so what does this mean now?"

Aveline stood before him, quietly still, but her eyes were bent on the ground. Then she raised them, and said, with a slight smile—

"I suppose, papa, it is that I have changed my mind."

"But you don't *love* him; you can't care for him?" said Mr. Verney.

Aveline hesitated.

"I don't *dislike* him, papa. I like him ever, oh, ever so much better than I used to do, now that I have seen more of him. He is like a rough but kindly boy in many ways—and—it does help to make me like him that he should like me; that he should have chosen me for myself—for, as mamma says, I have no fortune, and that is what most people think of nowadays. And no doubt he might marry far better, if he liked."

Mr. Verney groaned. It was strange to hear this worldly view of matters from Aveline's innocent lips; strange and sad, even though the way in which she expressed herself showed her own simplicity and unworldliness the more clearly. Full well did he know who had suggested it. Yet he felt that in honesty he could not deny that there was some truth in what she said. But another question hovered on his tongue.

"Assure me of one thing at least, my child—you care

for no one more?" he was on the point of saying, when he stopped short. His diplomatic training had taught him to beware of suggesting objections; too well he knew how a word of overcaution, of misgiving, may call into positive existence, may give definite form and substance to vague and unrealized possibilities, that would otherwise have faded into nothing ere they were born.

"If there is any one it is Hereward," he reflected; "and if Hereward it be, all the better if she has not owned it to herself. For they *couldn't* marry—Christina is right enough there—he has no prospects whatever; and even if he cared for her, he is too honorable to show it, and then there would be heart-breakings, and Heaven knows what."

So the words die on his lips. But Aveline stood waiting to hear what he was going to say.

"I don't like you to talk like that," he said. "My darling, do you think the man could find plenty of girls like you to marry, be they penniless or not?"

Aveline for the first time changed color a little, but it was with pleasure.

"I don't know," she said; "I suppose he could. But I like you to think me nicer than other girls, dear papa, of course. And," she went on eagerly, as if glad to get to this part of the subject, "there is one thing I *can* set your mind at rest about thoroughly, and that is about his—Mr. Ayrton's people. Whoever I married, papa, I could never like his father and mother better than, no, nor as much as, I like Sir Francis and Lady Ayrton. They are so good and kind to me."

"Yes," replied her father, "I believe they are to be relied upon." Still he spoke moodily, and sat with his eyes staring before him. "But Sir Francis Ayrton is in very bad health. He can not live very long, and, if he were dead, you would be altogether at the mercy of that—" He broke off and sat silent again. "Aveline," he went

on at last, “are you determined upon this? Do you know what you’re about? I have no actual right or reason to forbid it, for if I died, Heaven only knows what would become of us all. But—do you know what you’re about?”

“Yes,” said Aveline, steadily, “I think I do.”

Then she kissed him and went away.

Mr. Verney remained sitting where she had left him.

“No use saying anything more at present,” he reflected. “She’s not going to be married to him to-morrow, nor the day after. The thing may not go through. If I found out anything actually bad about the fellow I’d have to stop it, and—I should not be sorry. Still, there is truth in what she says. And, practically speaking, no doubt it would be an immense relief to have one of them thoroughly well provided for. She would be awfully good to the others, and she could afford to be so. But I hope, I earnestly hope, she hasn’t thought too much of this. I trust Christina has not been working on the girl’s unselfishness.” Then he got up and lit a cigar and sat down again. “I must keep my eyes open,” he said to himself, “though it isn’t easy just now, when I hardly ever am at home.”

On the whole, however, his face looked a trifle less care-worn than before the conversation with Aveline. But when, later in the evening, Lady Christina came softly into the room, and, glancing at him, felt encouraged to broach the great subject, she found “Owen” less responsive than she had been led to hope by the calm expression of his face.

“Our dear girl—Aveline—has—she has been speaking to you?” she began, doubting a little, as she went on, if indeed Aveline had done so.

Mr. Verney slowly took his cigar from between his lips.

“Yes,” he said. “But if you please, Christina, I don’t want to talk about it. I’m not going to object or interfere, you needn’t be afraid of that; but I’d rather not talk about it—not at present, any way.”

So thus, for the second time, Lady Christina's effusive satisfaction had to be repressed.

It might have been expected, nevertheless, that even failing response from the members of her own house, she was sure of completest sympathy in the success of their joint scheme on the part of her co-conspirator, her dear Sophia Ayrton. And Lady Ayrton was quite ready to give it, and in no stinted measure.

But—it was not somehow the sort of sympathy Christina wanted, and of this she was conscious even the very first morning, when Mr. Ayrton's mother hastened to her friend at an unearthly hour, and, after rapturously kissing and hugging all of the family she came across, retired with her to discuss it together in private. True, Lady Ayrton kissed Lady Christina again with the tears in her mild eyes, assuring her she would henceforth love her better than ever; but, this tribute paid to her friend's personal claims, she launched off into such praise of Aveline, such reiteration of her sweetness, her affectionateness, her general incomparableness, that it grew rather wearisome. Far rather would Lady Christina have heard some interesting details as to practical matters, but all such considerations Sophia waived aside—"Francis will go into everything with your husband," she said. "It will be all perfectly right. If only we—Wilfred, of course, first of all—can make that dear child of yours happy, I shall ask no more," and again the tears showed signs of appearing. Lady Christina had to get out her handkerchief to hide her irritation.

"Why should she not be happy, my dear Sophia?" she said, after a moment's pause. "She will have everything a girl can ask to make her so." "Sophia is really too sentimental for anything," she said to herself.

"I do hope it—I do indeed. So sweet of you to say so!" said Lady Ayrton.

"She would be a very unreasonable and ungrateful girl

if she were *not* happy," added Lady Christina, with the slightest possible touch of testiness in her tone, which her friend dimly perceived, though without understanding its cause.

"She is a dear girl," she replied, vaguely; "and you have brought her up splendidly, Christina."

"I have done my best," Lady Christina replied, slightly mollified. She had no objection to Aveline's being praised when her perfections were traced to their true source; at the same time it was irritating to perceive that the girl was showing herself at her best to the Ayrtons, exerting herself, in a manner not usual with her, to be bright and attractive, affectionate and responsive, to these strangers, and to her mother—to the one who deserved it all—comporting herself with a cold indifference of manner almost resembling tacit reproach!

And, strange to say, Aveline's cheerfulness was, in a sense, sincere. Had she not felt, one might almost say, happy, it was not in her to have acted the part, and for some little time the fictitious house of content which she had erected for herself appeared to her a real and sufficiently agreeable dwelling-place. Many things combined to foster this illusion. Wilfred Ayrton was at his best. He was sincerely obliged to Aveline for having reconsidered her first decision, for he had gone through some days of sharp anxiety lest he should after all lose the promised bribe, feeling sure that on him alone would fall Sir Francis's displeasure should his suit be rejected. And as in him an almost incredible amount of self-conceit was united to more grossly sordid defects, he did not, strange to say, altogether disbelieve in the unworldliness of the girl's motives.

"You're a deal luckier than you deserve to be," had been his father's somewhat uncomplimentary congratulation. "Try to be worthy of her liking and friendliness, if you can. You can't flatter yourself that she's in love with

you; but—such things do turn out decently now and then, after all, though *I* take no responsibility in the matter, mind you."

"I don't see why—" Wilfred began, but hesitated. Dread of his father's caustic tongue was perhaps the acutest intellectual sensation of which he was capable. "You are not very flattering to your son, sir," he added, with a clumsily self-conscious laugh.

Sir Francis looked at him with an expression, sardonic, satirical, and contemptuous, yet traversed by gleams of positively genial amusement quite impossible to describe.

"Upon my soul!" he ejaculated. But for Mr. Ayrton it was quite enough; he made no further attempt at self-assertion with his father.

And on second thoughts that gentleman was glad he had said no more.

"Better let him imagine she *is* in love with him than suggest any other motive, which he is incapable of appreciating," he reflected. "Poor little girl—she is in love with self-sacrifice, I fear. Thank God, it's the women, not I, that have had to do with it. The audacity, the recklessness of women—even a soft fool like Sophia, 'rushing in where angels fear to tread'—passes belief. But if it's to be, I'll do what I can for the child, provided only she cares for no one else;" and as this thought crossed his mind a certain recollection caused the invalid's thin, resolute face to grow sad and stern. "If that were so, I should indeed tremble for her."

He was not a little surprised and puzzled, though, on the other hand, relieved, to see the young girl looking genuinely happy when she came to receive the good wishes of her future father-in-law.

"Upon my soul, my dear Miss Verney," he said, "I have never seen you so blooming. I may really congratulate you, then? You are not frightened out of your wits at the idea of becoming the daughter of an old bear like me?"

"It's the part of it—" began Aveline, but she checked herself suddenly; "the part of it all I like the best," she was going to have said. "It is one thing that makes me really happy," she began again, "to think that you and dear Lady Ayrton are pleased. I don't think it can always be the case in such matters that, that—" and then she stopped, and smiled a little, and blushed a little.

"That a new daughter should meet with such a welcome," said Sir Francis. "My dear, if it were not so in this case we should indeed be hard to please. I could wish for no happier fortune for my son than to call you his wife; no greater blessing for myself during the few weary years that may still remain to me than to call you my daughter."

"Thank you," said Aveline, very gently. She was at all times impressionable, and at the present juncture in a far more high-strung condition than she had any conception of. The tears crept quietly into her eyes, and Sir Francis saw them, though he took care to look as if he did not.

"Surely," thought Aveline, "surely, if it makes so many people happy, I must be doing right. If only," and here was the sore root of bitterness—"if only mamma had kept to telling me it would be a good thing for them all, and a comfort to her and papa, without saying those dreadful things. Why couldn't she understand—she once was a girl herself—*why* couldn't she understand that I could have given up all thoughts of *him* quite as thoroughly, and oh, so much less bitterly, if she had just let me know it couldn't be—but that, if things had been different, it *might* have been? Why did she make me feel so dreadfully, so miserably *ashamed*?"

But she pulled herself up suddenly when it dawned upon her that Sir Francis was speaking.

"I beg your pardon," she said, hastily; "I am afraid I didn't hear what you were saying."

"Never mind, my dear, you have plenty of other things to think of. I was only asking what your plans are. I must not take up too much of your time."

"I have come to stay till the afternoon," said Aveline.
"I am going out with Lady Ayrton and your son."

"Speak of the ——, we'll suppress the rest," said Mr. Ayrton's voice, and he burst into a noisy laugh at his own wit as he entered the room. But Aveline was not inclined to be hard upon him; she always felt a little sorry for the young man in his father's presence, and she saw that the noisiness was to cover some amount of nervousness, or whatever answered to that in Mr. Ayrton's organization.

"There is a prettier version of that proverb," she said, gently, anxious to put father and son at their ease.

"There *is*," said Sir Francis, with his thin, cynical chuckle; "but, sorry as I am to adopt your suggestion, my dear Aveline, I confess I do *not* see its appropriateness in the present instance." For the old trick of sneering at his son was too strong upon him. Aveline reddened a little and glanced at her future father-in-law with reproach in her eyes. Wilfred stared at them both in bewilderment.

"The joke's beyond me," he said, with a kind of rough good-nature.

"And it is certainly not worth explaining," said Sir Francis, in a tone which Aveline felt was intended to express penitence.

"I've been speaking to Aveline about riding, sir," he began. "It's a shame she shouldn't have some just now —it's just the weather for it."

"Are you fond of riding, my dear?" asked Sir Francis.

"Yes—I think so. But I have ridden very little," said the girl.

There was not much enthusiasm in her tone—yet, a few weeks ago, how she and Nigel Hereward had longed for a canter in the Bois!

"Should I have to ride alone with *him*?" was the un-

spoken thought in her mind. But no sooner did she recognize it than she felt shocked at herself. "I dare say I should like it very much," she added, bravely, "if it could be managed."

"Managed?—of course it can be," said Wilfred. "I'll telegraph to-day to Mackworth and see which of the horses he thinks would do best."

"And who would go with you?" asked Lady Ayrton, who had followed her son into the room. "I wish my riding days were not over, for your sake, dear Aveline," she added, plaintively.

"I don't know the horse that would carry you if they weren't," said her son, coarsely; "but, for that matter, why need we have any one? I flatter myself I can look after *one* young lady—I've managed three or four before now."

"It would not do here," said Lady Ayrton, quickly; "if we were at home in the country it would be quite different, of course."

"Bother!" said Wilfred, "what's the sense of minding all these rubbishing French ideas? *We're* not French, thank goodness. But I say," as a brilliant idea struck him, "I know some ladies who'd join us in a jiffy. Those Miss Greenfliers—they ride every day. You remember them, my lady, at Pau—awfully jolly girls."

Lady Ayrton put some constraint on herself to reply quietly,

"Do you mean those Americans? No, I don't think they would suit Aveline at all."

"She isn't your wife *yet*," said Sir Francis, in a low but stern voice to his son; and Aveline, who caught the words, gave an involuntary shiver. She had now been engaged a week to Mr. Ayrton, though it was the first time Sir Francis had been well enough to see his daughter-in-law elect, and this interview, to which she had been look-

ing forward with some kind of pleasure, threatened to leave her in clouds of misgiving.

His father's tone acted as a cold shower-bath on Mr. Ayrton. In an ordinary state of matters the young man would have sullenly left the room. But the good-humor born of his present success and agreeable prospects—which he was not fool enough to desire to risk—came to the rescue.

"If that little sister of yours, now, could ride, she'd satisfy the proprieties, wouldn't she?" he said to Aveline.

"I suppose so," said Miss Verney, smiling. Mr. Ayrton's good-nature had restored her cheerfulness for the moment. "His father *is* too hard upon him, poor fellow," she thought.

And Sir Francis, seeming to divine her feeling, hastened to repair his blunder.

"It would be just as easy to get two ladies' horses over as one," he said, amiably.

"We must ask your mother about it," said Lady Ayrton. "It would be a nice change for Leo to ride; don't you think she would enjoy it, Aveline?"

"I—I am not quite sure," said Aveline, blushing a little, for in her heart she knew that her sister would like or enjoy no plan which included Mr. Ayrton's company. Leo was *the* one not to be won over; she had never been so miserable in her short life as since the announcement of Avé's engagement to "that vulgar little groom," and indeed for some time she had sturdily refused to believe in it.

"Rubbish," said Mr. Ayrton, elegantly. "She should be only too jolly pleased to get such a chance."

"She would have an excellent opportunity of acquiring an accurate and graceful way of expressing herself, in your company, my dear Wilfred. I trust, Aveline, you are quite sensible of the advantages of this kind held out to you," said Sir Francis, gravely.

It was impossible not to laugh, but this time Wilfred's

surface good-nature was not proof against his father's gibing. He muttered something "not loud but deep," and for an instant Aveline shivered at the scowl which over-spread his heavy features. Lady Ayrton interposed with nervous haste, and for her sake Miss Verney was glad to respond at once.

"Is mamma going to call for me?" she said. "No, I am going to see Mademoiselle de Villers, if it would be convenient to you to drive me round that way instead of home."

"Certainly, my love. Then, if you are ready, I think we had better go. Wilfred, just see if the carriage is ready. I think it is. I said in five minutes."

"It is too bad of Francis to tease so; he often does when he is suffering more than usual," she said to Aveline, as they were walking down-stairs together.

"Yes," the girl replied, "I understand."

She spoke so indifferently that Lady Ayrton hoped the little scene had made no impression on her. But inwardly the girl was quaking with apprehension. "Does he often look like that?" she was asking herself; "and does his mother know it?"

It was a pale and depressed-looking Aveline who entered Mme. de Boncœur's salon to receive her friends' good wishes on her engagement, even though Mr. Ayrton had recovered his good-humor long before they reached the Rue de Touraine, and had condescended to make some clumsy jokes on his *fiancée's* liking for "chattering old French-women."

CHAPTER VIII.

THEY were expecting her. All three ladies rose from their seats when Aveline entered, and came forward eagerly to meet her. For a moment or two she was kissed—on both cheeks—and caressed and murmured over to such an

extent that she scarcely knew where she was, and the little demonstration served one good purpose, for when it was over she was flushed and excited, so that even Mme. de Boncœur's keen old eyes were deceived.

"She is looking brilliant, the dear child," exclaimed Modeste's grandmother, joyfully. For, truth to tell, since the announcement of Miss Verney's engagement the old lady had had misgivings on the subject, though loyalty to Lady Christina had prevented her expressing them. "I must kiss you again, my dear," and so she did. "To think that a whole week should have passed since we heard the news, and that only now do we see you to wish you joy."

"I—I wanted very much to see you and dear Modeste," said Aveline, "but somehow, ever since the day you called, when I was so sorry to miss you, I seem to have been so busy."

"Naturally; that is easily understood," said the old lady. "Now, my children, I am sure you will like to be by yourselves for a little. Take your friend to your own quarters, Modeste, but bring her back to say a word to us on her way. You can stay an hour or two, dear Aveline?"

"Till five; then Leo and her governess will call for me," replied Miss Verney, as she went away with Mlle. de Villers.

"I am glad to see the child looking well," said Mme. de Boncœur to her daughter, when they were left alone. "I had—ah, well! perhaps I should not say it. I did not feel sure of this affair being for her happiness. And even now, I confess, I scarcely understand it. But tastes differ—fortunately."

Mme. de Villers looked up from her embroidery-frame, questioningly.

"Do you think she *is* looking well?" she said, in her slow, impassive way. "She was flushed and somewhat agitated at first, but afterward, when the color faded, I thought her pale, and anxious-looking. Still, there *can* be

no reason for it; I don't think I quite understand your misgivings, mother."

"It is very easy to understand—you should not force one to say things in a disagreeable, definite way, Alice; it does not sound nice," said the old lady, testily. "Of course I *meant* that I doubted if the child herself wishes this marriage. Christina is a good woman, but—these huge families: they make some women practical to the verge of becoming unscrupulous."

Mme. de Villers looked up in surprise.

"I thought—" she began.

"Never mind what you thought," exclaimed her mother; "I think Christina Verney at heart as worldly as any French mother of the old days that ever lived. Ah, bah! Never mind—I tire myself for nothing. But tell me, you don't think that poor child looking well?"

"No," replied the younger lady, "I do not."

"We must see what Modeste says," murmured Mme. de Boncœur.

Modeste, poor girl, was feeling at that moment very much at a loss what to say or what to think. She had met Aveline effusively, expecting to find her so happy in her new prospects that it would be easy to conceal her own want of sympathy in their attractiveness. For Mr. Ayrton had *not*—her readiness to see everything English in the most favorable light notwithstanding—agreeably impressed Mlle. de Villers; nor, which in her eyes was much more important, had he won the golden opinion of her *fiancé*, Maurice de Bois-Hubert.

"Ah, indeed!" had been that young gentleman's commentary on the news. "I am disappointed, I had thought your pretty friend's little drama was to have a different ending. What, then, has become of the great, handsome Englishman who talked French so well? Gone? Ah, that is a pity. Well, well, tastes differ, fortunately." The

same reflection with which Mme. de Boncœur was fain to console herself.

"I am so glad to see you again at last, dear Aveline," began Modeste, gently stroking her friend's hand. "I was in despair at missing you the day we called. You see, we should be more friends than ever now—now—that you too are *fiancé*, dear Aveline."

"Yes," Aveline replied, smiling faintly, "and we must make the most of our time, Modeste, for your marriage will be coming so soon. Oh, Modeste," she exclaimed, with a complete and sudden change of tone, "don't you hate the thought of it?"

Mlle. de Villers opened wide her large dark eyes and stared at Aveline in consternation, almost approaching horror. She thought that her friend must be going out of her mind.

"Aveline!" she exclaimed.

"Well," said Miss Verney, feverishly, "why do you stare at me like that, Modeste? They say—I have often heard people say—that girls do hate the idea when it comes near."

"Every girl must be sorry to leave her home and her old life, just as one is sorry when the spring goes, even though one knows the summer is coming," said Modeste. "But that is very different from hating the thought of one's new life, surely? Oh, no, if I felt so, I would not marry."

Aveline got up from her seat and walked impatiently to the window. She stood there for a moment gazing out vacantly, then she turned and came slowly back to Modeste.

"You're as bad as Leo," she said, with a quivering smile which was next-door neighbor to tears. "I had thought—I had hoped—I didn't expect you to think about falling in love and all that kind of thing—"

Modeste's face flushed.

" You don't, I hope, think I would marry if I hated the thought of it, as you say. I don't understand you, Aveline. Why did you accept this—Monsieur Ayrton, if you hate him?"

Aveline sat down and leaned her head back wearily.

" I don't *hate* him," she said; " that's what you won't understand. If I hated him I would not marry him. I dare say—I suppose—it will all turn out right enough."

" But why marry him if there is any doubt about it?" persisted Mlle. de Villers.

" Modeste," said Aveline, " I think you might understand without forcing me to say it. I think it is my duty to marry Mr. Ayrton. At one time I thought it impossible, but now—no, I don't hate him," with, again, a wintery smile. " He has behaved well and disinterestedly to me. He has been straightforward and in earnest from the first;" and here the girl's pale face grew red, " and—I don't expect much from life for myself. Surely, Modeste, it must be right to think of others? To see one wrinkle the less on papa's face, to know that I can make things easier for Chris and Arthur and for Leo; to know that dear Leo will be free to marry happily, with my help, perhaps—ah! think of the joy and delight of that, Modeste. I can not be doing wrong in thinking of others more than of myself."

Modeste's face expressed complete bewilderment. She took refuge for the moment in a question.

" And your mother?" she said. " You do not mention her, Aveline. Is it to please her too? Can you not speak openly to her and ask her advice?"

Aveline's pleading face grew hard.

" No," she said; " mamma is the last person in the world I could speak openly to about myself. Pleased? Yes, it is to be hoped she is pleased. Ah! but how little she understands!" and the hard look intensified. Then with a sudden effort she seemed to rouse herself. " You do not answer me, Modeste," she said. " Tell me, it can

not be wrong to forget one's self for others. *Your religion teaches this more than any, surely?"*

Modeste's lips opened as if to speak, then closed again.

"I don't know what to say, nor how to answer you," she said at last. "You put things in a way that puzzles me altogether. There must be wrong and right about it somewhere, if one could find it out."

The words struck Aveline.

"I suppose it is always wrong to do wrong," she said. "It would be wrong to marry a bad man because he was rich and your family wished it. But Mr. Ayrton isn't a bad man; he's only—I don't know how to say it—rough; perhaps even a little coarse."

Modeste gave a slight shiver.

"Oh, Aveline!" she said.

"He may improve," Miss Verney went on, calmly. "I am *very* fond of his father and mother, Modeste."

"Yes?" said Mlle. de Villers, more cordially than she had yet spoken. "I am glad of that."

"Then you will give me a little comfort, won't you?" said Aveline. "I have been looking forward to getting it from you. You are almost like a married woman now, you see, and that makes you seem older. Tell me, you don't think me wrong, dear Modeste."

"If—if you don't care for any one else more than for Monsieur Ayrton, I suppose—" Modeste began, hesitatingly.

But Aveline interrupted her.

"That even won't always hold water," she said, lightly. "You wouldn't tell a child who was crying for the moon that he must go on crying for it. You would rather advise him to play with his humming-top and forget all about the moon."

Modeste's sensible little face puckered up with perplexity.

"You bewilder me, Aveline," she said. "I have

never thought of things like that—they don't come in our way."

"So much the happier for you," interposed Miss Verney.

"I wish you could talk to *bonne maman*," cried Modeste.

"I couldn't," Aveline replied, "and it would be no use now. The die is cast. But now, Modeste," she went on, in a different tone, "let us talk of other things. Won't you tell me about your *trousseau* a little?"

Modeste was nothing loath to do so, and in the interest of the topic her anxiety about her friend fell a little into the background.

But it revived again that evening when, alone with her mother and grandmother, the latter made some little inquiry about Aveline.

"You found her in good spirits—your young friend—of course, as all is now arranged?" said the old lady.

Modeste hesitated.

"*Bonne maman*," she said, with a little sigh, "after all, though I love Aveline, I am not sure that I understand English girls. I am afraid about Aveline, *bonne maman*."

"Tell me, my child," said the old lady, gently. And Modeste tried to tell.

The two elder ladies glanced at each other.

"Ah!" said Mme. de Villers, under her breath. She was too kind-hearted not to feel sorry for her daughter's friend yet with this was mingled a curious sensation of triumph over her mother's *Anglomaine*. "How these English do mismanage their affairs!" she half whispered.

Mme. de Boncoeur looked very grave.

"Don't make yourself unhappy about it, my child," she said, gently stroking her granddaughter's hand.

"But, *bonne maman*," whispered Modeste, the tears creeping into her eyes, "she allows he is rough and even a

little coarse. Suppose he were to turn out really a brute—to be cruel to her—to ill-use her?"

"Calm yourself, Modeste. Her parents will have seen to *that*; her father is not the man to allow her to run such a risk—nor her mother. Christina is worldly, but she would not absolutely immolate her child."

"I could not take it upon myself to say," replied Mme. de Villers, to whom this question seemed to be addressed.

The old lady groaned.

"Alice," she exclaimed, "you horrify me."

Mme. de Villers raised her eyebrows.

"Dear mamma," she said, mildly, "don't put it upon me. I only repeat, like Modeste, that I don't understand these English folk and their ways."

Mme. de Boncœur looked so distressed that her granddaughter, reversing the position of a few moments before, tried to console her.

"*Bonne maman*," she said, softly, "Aveline herself said if he were a *bad* man she would never marry him. If it really should be so, let us hope she will find it out in time. She says he is rough and coarse—and indeed we have seen it for ourselves. That sort of man is probably not clever—he may let it be seen if he is really a—a—"

"A brute," suggested Mme. de Boncœur, laughing, her elastic spirits reasserting themselves. "Bravo, my little Modeste; I did not think you were already so wise. Let us hope, if it be so, that your predictions may come true. He drinks, probably—that is not a defect too easy to hide."

"Mamma!" said Mme. de Villers, with a glance in her daughter's direction. But the old lady gave a slight gesture of indifference. Modeste was not a child now, she was all but a married woman, she must hear such things spoken of now and then. But the girl herself was not so unimpressionable.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed, with dilated eyes.

"Oh, *bonne maman*, supposing he is as bad as that, and that she does *not* find it out! Oh, poor Aveline!"

"Let us hope for the best," said Mme. de Villers, placidly. "I have been told that among English people a broken engagement is not thought so grave an affair; so much the better in this case, perhaps."

And with this she dismissed from her mind all anxiety on the subject of her daughter's friend. But not so her old mother and Modeste.

When Aveline got home that afternoon and went into her own room she found Leo waiting for her. The sisters had of late been much less together than formerly. Aveline's new position had altered many things — among others, from it had resulted the first coldness that had ever existed between herself and her darling Leo.

"And to think," thought the elder sister to herself, sharply conscious of the irony of fate, "that it is greatly for her sake that I am doing it!"

To-day Leo struck her as looking brighter and more "like herself," as the saying is, and immediately the elder sister's heart grew lighter.

"What have you been about, Leo?" she said, cheerfully. "You look quite excited about something or other."

"Oh, yes, Avé. I've been waiting to catch you before you dress for dinner. Look what has come for me from Spain. Isn't it pretty?—just what I wanted, and with such a delicious scent. Isn't it good of him not to have forgotten?"

She held out as she spoke a rosary carved in sweet-scented wood, such as one sees in all Spanish and southern towns. It was of no great value nor rarity, but it pleased Leo thoroughly.

Aveline gazed at it but half comprehending.

"From Spain?" she repeated.

"Yes, of course," said Leo, impatiently. "Don't you remember—oh, perhaps, you didn't hear—that Mr. Here-

ward promised to send me a Spanish rosary as soon as he got there? It was one day when we were looking at those shabby little ones outside one of the churches," Leo went on, with a tone of supreme contempt for the formerly coveted treasures, "and I hadn't money enough to buy one. It is from him, I know, for he put one of his cards in with his address. I must write to thank him, mustn't I, Avé?"

"I suppose so. Yes, of course. You'd better ask mamma. Have you shown it to her?" asked Aveline.

"Yes, but she scarcely noticed it. She just said, 'Oh yes, very nice.' And when I said, 'May I write to thank him?' she said, 'Yes, if you like.' She was busy looking at a lot of lace with Lady Ayrton. But I thought I'd ask *you* about writing," and Leo fixed her very observant orbs full on her sister's face. It grew faintly pinker under the scrutiny.

"Why should I object to your writing?" she said, coldly.

"I didn't suppose you would. I thought you would tell me, perhaps, what to say. Shall I send any message from you?"

"My kind regards, if you like. You know what to say as well as I do; but you can show me the letter when it is ready, and I will see if it's all right. I must dress now, or I shall be late for dinner."

"Mayn't I stay with you while you dress, Ave?" asked Leo. Of late she had rather avoided this time together.

"If you like, dear," said Aveline; but her voice sounded tired.

"What are you going to put on? Your blue?" said Leo, in some surprise. "Oh, yes, I remember. Mamma said *they* were coming after dinner. Well, I sha'n't have to come in, anyhow."

"Leo," said Aveline, suddenly facing round upon her sister, "I wish you would not speak that way. You are

making things far harder for me than they need be, and I don't deserve it of you. You don't know—you can't understand—" she went on, with a catch almost like a sob in her voice, but she choked it down. " Leo, do come into the drawing-room this evening—you know mamma is pleased now for you to come whenever there is any one—and try to be nice to Lady Ayrton, and—and to her son."

Leo's face remained somewhat hard and unbending.

" I don't mind Lady Ayrton," she said. " She's kind and good enough, except—well, she couldn't very well be anything else to us—to *you*, Aveline. Just think what she's getting. But about Mr. Ayrton. I detest him, Avé. I detest him more and more every time I see him. I don't want to make things easier for you—the harder they are the better, if only it would make you give up this horrible marriage."

" Leo," exclaimed Aveline, almost in amazement—the child had never before spoken out her mind quite so plainly—" Leo, I have given my word."

" Does that mean that you would give it up if you could?" said Leo, her eyes gleaming.

" No," said her sister, calmly. " Nothing is altered. I have just the same reasons for agreeing to marry Mr. Ayrton that I had when I first accepted him."

Leo's face fell again.

" You've been with Modeste and her grandmother today," she began again. " What did they say? What do they think about it?"

" What do you mean, Leo?" said Aveline, impatiently. " You don't suppose I go running about asking everybody's opinion about what I am going to do?"

There was evasion in her reply, and evasion was what Aveline seldom condescended to. She felt ashamed of it, even while she thought it justified. She was ashamed, too, that Leonora should perceive it.

" I did not say 'everybody,'" replied the girl, quietly.

"Modeste is your best friend here. You might have said things to her that you wouldn't say to 'everybody,' certainly."

"Well, then," said Aveline, "I can't tell you what she said, or what I said to her."

A shadow of satisfaction stole over Leo's face.

"They don't like it, and they have told her so," she said to herself, "and I dare say that's what's made her so cross."

She turned to leave the room without speaking.

"Leo," Aveline called after her, "will you come into the drawing-room this evening?"

"I'll see," Leo replied. "I want to get my letter written first, and I shall take some time about it. I want to do it very nicely, *of course*."

And with this parting thrust she departed

Aveline sat for a moment or two gazing before her.

"Modeste, and now Leo," she said. "There seems no rest for the soles of my feet anywhere. I don't pity people who are martyrs if all their friends stay beside them supporting and praising them for what they are doing." She gave a bitter little laugh. "It's too bad to have done it, to have made up my mind it was right, and not to get any credit for it—except indeed from mamma, and her approval I don't want. She understands my real motives less than any one. Lady Ayrton, of course, is ready to praise me to any extent if I would let her, poor dear," and a softened look stole over Aveline's face.

"I understand *her* motives, and I can't blame her. But, altogether, this going over it all and questioning me, as Modeste and Leo do, is almost more than I can bear. I wish it could all be over sooner. I wish I could be married next week." And, "I wonder"—she allowed the thought to rest for a moment in her mind—"I wonder if *he* knows I am going to be married. Not that he would care. If he gave a thought to it he would probably de-

spise me for it and credit me with the lowest motives. But he could not despise me much more than he has done already, according to what mamma says."

And all softness left Aveline's face at this reflection.

CHAPTER IX.

AVELINE was glad when dinner was over, for she and her father and mother were dining alone, and she felt less able than heretofore to meet the shrewd, kindly glances Mr. Verney from time to time directed toward her from under his shaggy eyebrows, or, still worse, to reply with any sort of cordiality to her mother's rhapsodies about the lace in which she and Lady Ayrton had been investing.

"My purchases were very small, of course," Lady Christina ran on, "though I confess I never did feel so tempted to be extravagant in my life. It isn't every day one has a daughter going to be married." She glanced brightly at her two companions in turn, but on neither husband's nor daughter's face was any answering smile to be detected. She was getting used to this kind of thing, however, and dismissed all annoyance with a mental shrug of the shoulders. "*Some* day, perhaps, when Aveline has daughters of her own to marry, she will do me justice," she said to herself. And, with this consolatory reflection, she babbled on again—if a Lady Christina can ever be said to babble—in her softest tones about the Brussels and the Mechlin and all the rest of it.

"There were some flounces which positively made my mouth water; they would be so lovely, arranged in the new way, for your wedding-dress, Avé"—her daughter had never been anything less formal than Aveline till the new state of things. "But your Aunt Barbara has always promised you her old lace for *that*, and of course there is something eminently respectable in old lace. And I can

tell you—are you listening, Aveline?—whether you have your wedding-dress trimmed with them or not, I don't suppose it will matter to you in the end that *I* could not afford the flounces for you. For Sophia bought them, and looked very mysterious over it, and she chose those *I* thought the prettiest."

Lady Christina nodded her head with great satisfaction. Aveline smiled faintly; something just then made her feel sorry for her mother.

"Lady Ayrton is exceedingly kind; very, very kind," said the girl.

Mr. Verney glanced up.

"Yes," he said, "she is both kind and generous. It is not often that very rich people are so generous."

Lady Christina beamed with satisfaction, but Aveline said nothing. She had detected a certain under-tone in her father's voice.

In the drawing-room, a few minutes later, Leonora, in correct white muslin, and with neatly arranged hair, made her appearance. Aveline glanced at her with approval.

"She has done it to please me, the dear," she reflected, and she welcomed Leo with a bright smile, which brought the child across the room.

"Avé," she whispered, "can you look at my letter before they come? I have it here all ready, and mamma is busy just now. Just come into the little drawing-room a moment."

Aveline followed her sister. The letter was irreproachable. She read it carefully, and was just putting it back into the envelope when sounds in the next room announced the guests' arrival.

"Quick, Avé!" said Leo. But Aveline, always deliberate in her movements, saw no reason to hurry. A moment later she regretted she had not done so.

Wilfred Ayrton, his face adorned with a foolish smile and even redder than usual, with a something indescriba-

ble about his whole bearing and appearance, which the two girls felt rather than saw, came slouching unsteadily into the room.

"What're you after, in here by yourselves, young women?" he began. "Up to mischief, no doubt. Writing billy-doos, eh? Can't stand that sort of thing, you know."

His voice was not exactly thick, or perhaps, as it was at no time clear, not any startling difference was perceptible, but the tone and the words were sufficient. Aveline looked up haughtily.

"Mr. Ayrton!" she exclaimed.

He was too stupid to understand her manner at once. He burst into a coarse laugh, and putting out his hand caught hold of the letter in Aveline's fingers. In her amazement she made no effort to retain it, nor did she recover her presence of mind till he had drawn it from the envelope and was holding it up to read. And even then all the girl did was to sink back on her chair with a look of almost wild appeal to her younger sister.

"Leo," she whispered, "I can't struggle with him. What can we do?"

Mr. Ayrton meanwhile had made himself master of the first sentence.

"'Dear Mr. Hev—Hew—'" he stammered, "'dear Mr. Hereward.' Oh, indeed, that's it, is it? You're writin' to *that* fellow, are you? I say, Aveline, I'm not goin' to stand that kind of thing, you know. I must see what it's all about, any way. 'I—I thank you very much indeed for your lovely present.' Has the fellow been sending you presents?" said Mr. Ayrton, frowning upon Aveline, his face so distorted and inflamed with temper as to seem positively repulsive, his voice clearer for the moment with the force of his excitement. "Answer me at once, or I—I—" and he stammered and spluttered in the vain

endeavor to find his words. Aveline and Leonora grew pale with fear.

"Run, Leo, run for papa," whispered the elder girl, half wildly, and Leonora flew. But at the door between the two rooms she knocked against Lady Ayrton, who, after a word of greeting to her hostess, had thought it advisable to follow her son, and that not without considerable trepidation and misgiving.

"Not so fast, my dear—not quite so fast, please," said the poor lady, with nervous good-nature; "why, where are you off to, Leo? Is anything the matter?" as she caught sight of Leonora's face.

"It's Mr. Ayrton. He's been so rude to Avé—and he is so queer. I think he's going out of his mind. I'm going to fetch papa," Leo replied, in her agitation quite forgetting to whom she was speaking.

Lady Ayrton caught her by the arm.

"My child, I beg you to do nothing of the kind. I will speak to Wilfred. He is hot-tempered, you know. I understand him. Run in to your mother. I will send Aveline to you. But don't say anything to your father, I beseech you. Men, you know, are different. It might lead to a quarrel if Wilfred has lost his temper. Your father is still in the dining-room. Leo, dear, I entreat you!"

Mystified, but impressed, Leo gave in.

Lady Ayrton hurried up to the corner where Aveline, still pale and trembling, sat watching her *fiancé* as he glared at the paper.

"Wilfred," said his mother, in a low voice, but more sternly than Aveline could have believed her capable of speaking, "what is all this?"

Mr. Ayrton started, and the look on his face as he turned to his mother was one of fear.

"That's—that's just exac'ly what I'd like to know," he said. "A letter to that—that fellow—I can't stand that sort o' thing, you know."

"Give me the letter, Lady Ayrton, please," said Aveline. "It is poor little Leo's," she added, when she at last got it into her hand. "But—he—he has been so—he frightened us so."

"It will be all right, my love—you will see," said the poor mother, forcing herself to speak cheerfully. "Wilfred takes up things wrongly, and he is hasty," she added, in a lower voice. "Leave him to me. I wished him not to come to-night. He—he was put out before we left home. Just leave him to me, dear. Will you go into the other room?"

"No," said Aveline, "I will go to my own room. Say good-night to mamma for me—say anything you like;" and as her future mother-in-law followed her to the door with broken words of "explaining it to-morrow—" "Wilfred will be so distressed," she turned and faced her for one instant. "Lady Ayrton," she said, "tell me the truth. Has he been drinking?"

There was no need for an answer, but the poor woman caught the girl's two hands in her own. "Aveline," she entreated, "don't be too hard on him. It is so long since I have seen him so. I was quite happy. And your influence? Many young men—" she went on, disjointedly. "Oh, don't say or do anything hurriedly! Wait a little."

"I am going to my own room. I am not going to do anything to-night," said Aveline. She was quivering with eagerness to get away.

"Thank you—God bless you!" exclaimed Lady Ayrton, snatching at the half-promise of deliberation that the words contained.

And Aveline rushed to her own room, and there throwing herself into a chair, burst into tears.

"Why must things be so much harder for me than for others? I had made up my mind to it, and I thought it was right," she sobbed.

Mr. Ayrton and his mother left almost immediately.

Between them the two women managed to get him away without his being seen by Mr. Verney. And Leonora was sent to bed. She sat up for some time, however—she rewrote her crushed letter to Mr. Hereward, and closed and directed it, ready to be posted the next morning. It was exactly the same as its predecessor, but with the addition of a postscript marked “private,” which ran thus: “I don’t know if you have heard that Avé is going to be married to Mr. Ayrton. At least I’m afraid she is, and I *hate* him.”

Aveline woke the next morning with the strange feeling, known to us all, that something of importance, which for the moment she could not clearly recollect, had happened. As she gradually gathered together her ideas and realized the events of the day before, her perplexity changed its direction, but only to increase in intensity.

“What can I do? What shall I do? Will mamma not help me in some way? Should I go to papa or to her? I wonder what Modeste and her grandmother would tell me to do,” were the ideas that chased each other round her brain as she dressed. She felt nervous and almost dazed as she sat waiting for her mother at the breakfast table.

“What will she say? How will she bear the disappointment? But at worst she can’t blame me,” thought the girl, as she turned tremulously at the sound of the door opening.

“Good-morning, my dear. Is your headache better? Lady Ayrton told me you thought it best to go to bed. Mr. Ayrton had a headache too, or else he was cross at your disappearance. They did not stay long. I think it must be something in the weather, for I feel rather done up myself. Dear me, how late it is! And we must be at Sophia’s by eleven; we arranged to go to her dressmaker’s this morning. I want to know her prices before ordering any of your dresses.”

Lady Christina ran on so fast that, till she fairly stopped to take breath, Aveline could not have got in a word.

But her face had all this time been growing more and more amazed-looking, her blue eyes opening more and more widely with an expression almost of horror. And when it was possible for her to speak, she ejaculated but the one word,

“Mamma!”

Lady Christina glanced at her for an instant with a sort of contempt, not, however, altogether unmixed with uneasiness.

“What are you staring at me like that for, Aveline?” she exclaimed, irritably. “Really, my dear, there are times when you make yourself look as if you had not all your senses.”

Aveline took no notice of the taunt. Her energies were too completely concentrated in the one direction.

“Mamma,” she said again, this time in a low, almost imploring tone, “can it be that you do not know? You must have seen—his mother knew it—that—that Mr. Ayrton was drunk last night. Mamma, oh, mamma, it must alter everything.”

Lady Christina glanced at her daughter again; this time the contempt was uppermost.

“Really, Aveline, foolish as I know you to be, I did not think quite so poorly of you as you force me to do. And so unladylike in your expressions. Drunk!—what a word to apply to a gentleman, and to the gentleman you are going to marry!”

“It is more ungentlemanlike to be it, than it is unladylike of me to say it,” returned Aveline. “And you are mistaken, mamma, I am not going to marry him.”

“You are,” retorted her mother, losing her temper. “I shall not allow my daughter to jilt any man.”

Aveline rose from her chair.

“I will go to papa,” she said, “and see what he says,” and she turned toward the door.

Lady Christina’s tone changed at once.

"Aveline, I beseech you, do nothing of the kind. Your father is not well this morning. He has had worrying letters—more expense for Chris, and your Uncle Bart can't help him—and—and other things. This coming to Paris has cost more than we expected, and the London house not letting. Aveline, don't be exaggerated. You have taken up Mr. Ayrton mistakenly. He had a headache, and Sir Francis had been very sharp with him, and he may have taken a *little* more than is strictly advisable. I don't think he has a very strong head; and then he was rather irritable, I suppose, and something you said put him out, Sophia told me—not that she blamed you in the least. That was it, was it not?"

"Partly, I suppose," Aveline replied, vaguely, thankful that her mother knew nothing about the letter to Mr. Hereward.

"Well, you see how it looks when it is taken reasonably. We will talk about it afterward; but, I entreat you, Aveline, say nothing as yet to your father. I don't, no, I don't know what we should do if this marriage were to fall through;" and Lady Christina clasped her hands together.

Aveline was not proof against this new species of attack. Her only safety lay in flight.

"I will go before papa comes in," she said. "If he saw me I could not conceal that something was the matter. I don't want any more breakfast. I have drunk my coffee."

"I will not take you to Sophia's this morning," said her mother. "I will go myself, and—and—just see a little. Go out with Leo, my dear; your nerves have been upset, and I will see you when I come in."

And Aveline, ashamed of her weakness, dissatisfied and miserable, yet knowing that she had no strength to do otherwise, once her mother appealed to her as she had done, left the room.

Things turned out easier for her in the first place than

she could have hoped. There was a respite, for Lady Christina came back from the Ayrtons' hotel with the news of their leaving Paris for a few days. Sir Francis had a longing for country air, and they were going off to Compiègne at once. Aveline could not repress a heartfelt ejaculation of thankfulness, which Lady Christina diplomatically affected not to hear, and her whole tone and manner remained softened and sympathizing.

"Your nerves have been upset of late, my dear child," she said, gently. "I can quite understand it; you have had so much to think of. A few days quietly by ourselves will do both you and me good."

"Lady Ayrton has been making mamma promise to be very kind and patient with me. I see it all," thought Aveline. "She knows me so well. I wish mamma had kept to the way she spoke this morning. *Then* I could have resisted her. But poor papa, and all the troubles! And after all, if I give this up, what else have I to look forward to? If we were really poor people—*quite* poor—and I could work for them, how much happier it would be!"

And then there rose before her the recollection of Mr. Ayrton's red, inflamed-looking face, of his coarse tones and repulsive presence, of the evening before.

"No," shuddered Aveline, "I *can't* marry him. What a fool he is! Why did he not keep on the mask, if it was a mask, a little longer? Once married to him, my duty would be clear. *That* is what is torturing me—the not knowing what to do. If it is the case, as his mother said, that last night was accidental? For it is true that Sir Francis is very hard upon him. And, whatever his faults and failings are, he has been straightforward and disinterested to me. Can he have heard any gossip about Mr. Hereward? If so, I don't wonder that he was angry at thinking I was writing to him."

And as the days went on this new idea gathered fresh

force. It was strengthened, almost unconsciously to Aveline, by little allusions on her mother's part to hints contained in Lady Ayrton's letters of Wilfred's distress of mind.

"Poor fellow," Lady Christina would murmur; "he has no tact, no *savoir faire*, as his mother says. He is too bunglingly honest, and gets blamed where a clever man—a man more alive to his own interests, a man of the world, in short—would get off scot-free."

"I don't see—" began Aveline, and then she hesitated.

"What, my love?" said her mother, encouragingly.

"A man need not be a selfish man of the world to be gentle and courteous, and to—to know when he has had as much wine as is good for him," said Aveline, her cheeks flaming.

"Ah," said Lady Christina, slowly shaking her head, "you are so inexperienced, Aveline. What do you know of those charming, to all appearance chivalrous men, behind the scenes? They will steal a girl's heart with their gentle, courteous ways, and then make fun of her. Ah, no, my love, all is not gold that glitters."

And, though Aveline would have died rather than let her mother know it, the shaft went home.

Mlle. de Villers's marriage was to be in ten days. The usual evening party for the signing of the contract took place the day before the return of the Ayrtons from Compiègne, and for this Aveline was grateful. Lady Ayrton and her son would certainly have been invited, and since her last conversation with Modeste, above all with the consciousness of her own increased misgivings, she shrunk with the greatest reluctance from appearing with her *fiancé* before her quick-eyed and quick-witted friends. She exerted herself to seem particularly bright and lively, so that Lady Christina herself was deceived, and laid her head on her pillow the night of the *soirée de fiançailles* with the happy conviction that Aveline had come back to her senses.

"The going to Compiègne was an excellent move on Sophia's part," she said to herself; "and this marriage coming on will make Aveline realize what it would be to give up all thoughts of her own."

The next day brought Lady Ayrton. With great tact she asked at once for Miss Verney; Lady Christina, by a happy coincidence, was on the point of going out, and begged Aveline to excuse her to her friend. Aveline hesitated.

"I don't want to see her alone, mamma," she began; but she was quickly interrupted.

"My dear, it is exactly what I do wish. I will not interfere in any way, or attempt to influence you. You must judge for yourself, Aveline. It is a thing in which no one can decide for you."

And with these words the girl felt that her fate was again taken out of her hands.

"I can't decide for myself when it is to make other people unhappy—and mamma knows it," thought Aveline, as she opened the drawing-room door.

And had she been far more resolute than was possible for her to be, her decision would have been shaken by the sight of Lady Ayrton's appealing face. She looked white and care-worn. Truth to tell, the sojourn at Compiègne had not been a time of peace and sunshine for the poor woman. She had longed for, and yet dreaded, the return to Paris, when she must learn the result of Aveline's "thinking things over." She felt, as regarded her son, like a gambler who has staked his all on a last throw.

She was not of a nature to act with much diplomacy, had diplomacy been required. But such was not the case, and no tact or skill could have stood her in such good stead as did the display of her real and intense anxiety. As Aveline entered the room Lady Ayrton rose from her seat and came toward her, both hands extended.

"My dear," she began, "I asked to see you alone. I

am so anxious—I have been so unhappy. And Wilfred, too"—the words came less easily here—"Wilfred has been so unhappy and so remorseful," and with this Lady Ayrton put her hands on the girl's shoulders and burst into tears.

What could Aveline do, what could any girl in her place and of her nature have done, but soothe the poor woman with words which bore more significance than the speaker fully realized? It is always painful to see the tears of old or even elderly people; to Aveline, unaccustomed to much expression of emotion, it was peculiarly so. And, before she well knew what she was about, there was Lady Ayrton rapturously kissing and thanking her, assuring her that the lesson should be one by which her son should profit as long as he lived; that *never* should her sweet girl, her daughter-to-be, repent her generosity, her goodness!

"And he may come to see you again, may he?" concluded Wilfred's mother; "or will you come to us, as you used? Would you spend to-morrow with us? Sir Francis is longing to see you," to which proposal Aveline agreed. A reconciliation scene in her mother's presence, and with her mother's remarks and felicitations, would, she felt, have been more than she *could* stand.

She was not nervous at the idea of meeting Mr. Ayrton now; the worst was over, the die was cast, and there was nothing to do but walk on, not blindfold, but refusing to see.

And the next day passed much as she had expected. Wilfred was sheepishly subdued, making clumsy efforts to show his regret and gratitude, which, out of a sort of almost grotesque pity, she received graciously enough for him to have recovered before the end of the afternoon his usual bearing of clownishly good-humored satisfaction.

"And this," thought Aveline to herself, with an instinct stronger than the inexperience on which her mother laid so much weight, "this is to be my life."

Sir Francis was as charming as to her he had always been. But she thought him looking very ill—much worse than when she had last seen him: and more than once she caught his eyes fixed upon her with an expression half melancholy, half scrutinizing, which puzzled and yet touched her. It was like, and yet not like, the glances which, from time to time, her father darted at her from under his eyebrows.

“Is he sorry for me, or does he look down upon me?” she asked herself. And, indeed, at this juncture the question was one which Sir Francis Ayrton could not himself have answered.

CHAPTER X.

THERE was a large gathering of well-dressed people at the Church of St. Z—— the morning of the marriage of M. Maurice de Bois-Hubert and Mlle. Modeste de Villers, a much larger gathering than the Verneys in their experience had expected. For Mme. de Boncœur had impressed upon them that it was to be a very quiet affair.

“Times are changed,” said the old lady, “and not for the better, since the day twenty-three years ago, when I married my Alice. That was a brilliant spectacle. But in the present state of our unhappy country, any great display, even on an occasion of undoubted rejoicing, would be in very questionable taste.”

Thus it came to pass that when Mr. Verney, his wife, and daughter entered the church, they found almost every corner occupied. The places reserved for the relations and near friends of the bride and bridegroom were inaccessible; it was all Mr. Verney could do to find separate seats for Lady Christina and Aveline at some little distance from each other, and standing-room for himself in the shelter of a pillar.

Aveline was not sorry to be, so to speak, alone, and free

from her mother's whispered comments. The church was not a very large one, but things had been well-arranged. Exquisite white flowers against a background of palms and rare shrubs tempered the gilding and color of the altar, too brilliant and ornate for northern eyes.

"I have never seen a French church look so solemn and yet beautiful," thought Aveline, and when the music, the very best of its kind, was added to the whole, the girl felt almost too deeply impressed. The tears would come to her eyes when they descried the figure of Modeste, familiar and yet strange in its new dignity of bridal attire, kneeling beside the man she had chosen for her husband, and not a word of the service was lost upon the English maiden.

"How is it?" she asked herself, "I have been at several marriages, but I never felt like this before. Is the French service more impressive than ours, or is it that I have never before thought so much about it? How glad I am to know that Modeste really loves him, and to feel, as sure as one can feel, that she is going to be happy!"

But with these reflections there returned to her with irrepressible force the misgivings, the cruel misgivings, she had so tried to stifle.

"How should I feel if I were to-day kneeling there in Modeste's place, with *him*, Wilfred Ayrton, beside me? How shall I feel when the day comes for it, as come it must?"

She shut her eyes for an instant—a feeling of dizziness came over her. The bridal party by this time had left the altar and withdrawn to the sacristy, there to await their friends and their congratulations. People began to talk together, for the most part in subdued tones, but some ladies in Miss Verney's immediate neighborhood were less cautious.

"So there's another happy pair done for," were the first words Aveline overheard, in the sharp nasal tones of a *not*

first-class American. "Let's hope they're going to have a better time than most French couples, by all accounts."

"Well, now, Stella, I don't agree with you there. You've got your notions out of novels. For my part I believe there's good and bad of all kinds. I'd take a Frenchman to-morrow, if—"

"If he'd got a title—that's the plain English of it with you," laughed the first speaker. "But don't you be in a hurry, Cilly. Look about you awhile. And, by the bye, what's become of Will? He said he'd be sure to be here."

"I've not seen him, and I'm not going to look for him. He'll be tied on to his young lady and her people to-day. He's on his good behavior since that flare-up he told us of, you know."

"All the same I'd be sorry to bet on that marriage ever coming off," replied the first speaker. "Will won't find it so easy to keep on his good behavior for long; there'll be another flare-up some day, when he gets just a little bit excited, you know, Cilly. It isn't as if he cared about the girl."

"But he cares about Garthdean—isn't that the name of the place he's to have when the marriage comes off? It's real mean of the old people to entrap the poor fellow into a marriage by bribing him like that, and so I told him from the first, at Pau."

"Well, he is not married yet," resumed Miss Lucilla's sister or cousin—Aveline never knew the relationship of the two speakers—"and with your money, Cilly, I say it'll be strange if you can't get what you want for it, considering you've come to Europe on purpose. But don't you think we'd best go now? We'll have a better view of them coming out if we station ourselves by the door."

Then ensued a rustling and moving which told Miss Verney that her unwelcome neighbors had taken themselves off.

They had not seen her, of that she was certain; there

had been no intention in a single word of those she had overheard. Trembling from head to foot, too bewildered to think clearly, Aveline drew back in her corner as far as possible and tried to collect herself. Her one idea for some time was to remain hidden till she could succeed in doing so. She did not even look up when, by the whispered remarks about her, she became aware that the bridal cortège was passing down the aisle.

"Modeste will not distinguish me among so many," she said to herself, "and I must, I *must* think. Oh, I do *so* hope they will not be there! I *could* not speak to him, and it would be almost harder to speak to his mother. I have thought her so sincere—I have believed he cared for me for myself. Fool that I have been!"

Five minutes later she heard her mother's voice.

"We are going, Aveline. Are you asleep, my dear? Why, what is the matter? You look so white. The heat, I suppose?" as Aveline murmured some vague excuse. "Thank goodness, there is nothing to cry about in Modeste's marriage," with a rather sharp glance at her daughter's eyes. "I can not imagine what has become of the Ayrtons. Sophia was quite determined to come. They will make their appearance at the Rue de Touraine, however, no doubt."

But in this, to Aveline's immense relief, Lady Christina did not prove a prophet. The truth was that Mr. Ayrton had declined to accompany his mother, and she thought it better to stay at home than to risk inconvenient questions and remarks.

"I had such a headache," she told her friend, when Christina drove round to inquire.

"Ah, yes, with the heat, I suppose. Aveline is not well to-day, either. She walked home with her father, and asked me to tell you how sorry she was not to have seen you and Wilfred."

This message, needless to say, was an invention; Aveline

had never mentioned the Ayrtons' name. Her pallor and evident suffering had drawn down upon her much sympathy from her friends and some veiled indignation from her mother.

"So silly and sentimental of you to look as if you were going to faint because your friend is happily married," said Lady Christina, cuttingly, though in a low voice; while old Madame de Boncœur kissed her with a tenderness that nearly brought the tears to her eyes, and Modeste whispered, "Dear Aveline, I can not bear to see you looking so ill. It is the only cloud in my sky to-day."

Mr. Verney had his own ideas on the subject, but said nothing; and Aveline was grateful to be left alone, and thankful to find herself at last in her own room, free to decide on her course of action.

"If what I heard is true, I can not marry him. The one thing I believed in was his disinterestedness. There can be no mistake. Those women can not but have meant him. The name 'Will,' and Garthdean, my future home, as Lady Ayrton always calls it! Still, I suppose it is fair to ask for an explanation—for the truth. But whom can I ask, and how can I bear my life with mamma when it is all given up?"

There came a tap at the door.

"Come in," said Aveline, starting up. But she need not have started; it was only Leo.

"Avé," said she, "papa sent me to you. He told me you had such a bad headache. What is it, dear Avé? You look so very ill."

For all answer Aveline put her arms round her young sister, and burst into tears.

"Leo, dear, I don't know what to do," she exclaimed. "It seems as if I were fated never to know what I should do. I had fixed to marry Mr. Ayrton. I thought it my duty. Then I wanted to give it up after that evening, you

know; and I was persuaded into it again, and again I thought it right. And then to-day, at the church, when I saw Modeste and Monsieur de Bois-Hubert married, and I felt that they cared for each other, and that Modeste was not afraid of what she was doing, it all came over me quite differently again, and—” Leo’s eyes were sparkling.

“ And you felt you could not marry that man?” she interrupted. “ Oh, Avé! keep to that; it is the right feeling—”

“ Stop!” said Aveline, “ you haven’t heard half.”

Then she went on to tell Leonora what she had heard, and the interpretation she could not but put upon it.

“ And what can I do?” she finished by saying, helplessly.

Leo’s face was a study; her color went and came; her eyes by now were positively gleaming.

“ Aveline,” she said, “ you are older than I, and I suppose I’ve no right to say it, but do you know I am really ashamed of you? Here are you wondering what you should do, and thinking things are so hard for you, when you should be ready to jump with joy—I am, I know—that you’ve found it all out. I knew that man didn’t really care for you—he *couldn’t*. And now you see that he has only wanted to marry you to please his father and mother, and to get them to give him that place and lots of money, and *yet* you say you don’t know what to do.”

“ I must find out the exact truth,” said Aveline. “ I can not act upon gossip overheard by accident. And I don’t know whom to get the truth from. His mother”—and Aveline gave a shiver—“ his mother would throw herself upon me and cry—and—oh, Leo, it would be horrible!”

“ I can’t understand how you can be sorry for her or for his father. They were ready to sacrifice you. I dare say that man’s just horribly wicked. I dare say,” said Leo, impressively, “ he gets drunk every evening when we don’t see him.”

"Perhaps," Aveline agreed. "But, however bad he is, I am dreadfully sorry for his father and mother."

There was a moment or two's silence.

"Will you speak to papa?" said Leo, abruptly. "I can call him. He's not gone out yet, and mamma has not come home."

"No," said Aveline, "I don't want to mix papa up in it. He would be so fearfully angry about it all—with the Ayrtons, and—and with mamma. I want him to know of it, when it is done, as quite my own doing—not that I had found out anything. I will tell you, Leo, what I think will be best. I will speak to Sir Francis Ayrton. He is a gentleman; he can not deceive me when I put it to him plainly. And I have a right to know."

"I should think so indeed," said Leo. "Well, then, write him a note—now, this minute—to ask him when you can see him alone. I'll take it when I go out with Elise. Write it now, Avé."

And, sternly determined, the young girl stood over her sister till the words were written. The letters were tremulous and the note was somewhat incoherently expressed, but Leo cared little for that.

"Once she sees him and tells all, it must come to an end," thought she. For in her heart she doubted if Mr. Ayrton's father had taken much part in the scheme.

"It is all his mother," she thought to herself, "and mamma, though I will never say so as long as I live. But when I am grown up, I shall not be as meek and giving-in as poor Avé."

Sir Francis Ayrton was surprised and somewhat discomposed by the receipt of Miss Verney's note.

"Some new misbehavior of Wilfred's, I suppose," he said to himself. "She is getting frightened, perhaps. So much the better for her. I have never been able to understand the girl. I think I have never felt sure of its going through. Thank Heaven, I had nothing to do with

it! But that makes it all the harder lines that I should be dragged into it now. Why can't the girl speak to Sophia? Why can't she have it out with that precious son of mine himself? If a nice, pretty girl will engage herself to a cub, she should take the consequences."

Sir Francis's bark, however, was worse than his bite. The note which Aveline received from him the next morning was couched in the kindest terms, naming an hour at which she could see him alone, delicately intimating rather than expressing his gratification at the trust she placed in him.

But though he did not let it be seen, the invalid gentleman was nearly as nervous as Aveline herself when, the next afternoon, she was ushered into his sitting-room. He was as usual on his sofa, and, as he had promised her, alone.

"It is kind of you to let me come to see you. I—I wish I had not needed to ask it," began Aveline, her lips quivering.

"My dear young lady," replied the baronet, "you have every conceivable right to ask me what you choose. Not merely as a friend, but as—"

"I know what you are going to say," interrupted the girl. "Don't say it, please. I shall never be more than a friend to you. You will understand when you hear what I have to say."

"Oh!" said Sir Francis, and the low exclamation sounded so like a groan of pain that Aveline glanced at him anxiously. But, though pale—very pale—he was smiling slightly, though his hand was pressed against his side. "There is nothing the matter," he went on, hastily, detecting her frightened expression. "Anything, nothing, gives me a little spasm, but it is over already."

And so it was. Aveline's first words had told him all. It was a sharper disappointment than he had suspected himself of being still capable of feeling, as regarded any-

thing in connection with his graceless son. "I had counted on it more than I knew," thought Wilfred Ayrton's father. "It was a sort of last chance for him."

"So please go on with what you have to say, my dear—Miss Verney," he added, with a momentary hesitation.

Aveline's eyes filled with tears. It had pleased her for Sir Francis to call her by her Christian name—to fancy herself already beginning to fill a daughter's place to the daughterless man. But she forced herself to go on, as he bade her.

"I have heard something—accidentally—in fact I overheard it," she said, slowly, "which—which has altogether changed my opinion of your son, and made me feel I can not marry him. I want to tell it to you, and I must ask you to tell me if it is true."

"I may perhaps not be able to do so," replied he. The girl puzzled him—there were plenty of old scandals about Wilfred from his school-days onward, but of late the father had believed him to have been conducting himself better. "Why should she come to me if she has got hold of any of his delinquencies? It would have been more natural to speak to her mother, or"—as Lady Christina's hard face rose before him—"to her father."

"Oh, yes," said Aveline, "you can, for it has to do with you." And then in simple but clear words she related what she had overheard. "It is he himself who has told it, you see. Oh, Sir Francis! is it true that you *bribed* him to marry me? And I—fool that I have been!—do you know that I believed that in his way he cared for me—that he was, though rough and unattractive, honest and disinterested? That was his one recommendation to me, and that is gone."

Sir Francis sat for a moment, with his hand so shading his face that Aveline could not see it, in perfect silence. And for that moment Aveline, in the vividness of her sym-

pathy with him, almost brought herself to hope she was mistaken.

"Is it true?" she said, at last, very gently.

The invalid raised himself, and there was a look on his face that Aveline had never seen there before, and which she never forgot.

"Yes," he said, sharply, "it is true."

One or two tears made their way to her eyes and rolled down her face. Sir Francis caught sight of them and his voice softened.

"I do not wish to exonerate myself," he said, "but nevertheless, I should like you to know that I had no hand in it, beyond agreeing to what his mother begged me to do. She—poor thing—he is her only child, and she thought such an end as she hoped for justified all means, I suppose. But as you ask me plainly, I answer you in the same way. Wilfred would never have dreamed of asking you to marry him, but for the material advantages promised to him if he succeeded in his suit. And in saying this I infer no sort of mortification to you—rather the contrary. My son is a man *incapable* of appreciating such a woman as you. But for your really astounding inexperience, you would have felt this yourself. Did you never feel it?" And he looked up at her sharply again.

"I don't know," said Aveline. "But I believed in his disinterestedness—completely." She sat silent for a moment or two. Then a sort of bitterness of indignation came over her. "Sir Francis Ayrton," she said, "it was doing me a terrible injury to let me do so. No one has any right to deceive a girl like that."

Sir Francis hesitated.

"No, I suppose not. But I am not going to say any more about who was the most to blame. It is useless. But you, yourself—you could not have loved him? Do you think it right to marry a man you could neither love nor respect?"

On her side Aveline hesitated.

"I thought I did respect him when I accepted him," she said; "and in some ways I continued to think so till yesterday. And I did not dislike him—and—there were so many motives. I have been so happy with you and Lady Ayrton—and I wanted to be of use to papa and all of them at home," and here her voice broke down altogether.

"Poor child," said Sir Francis. "Yes, you were right as regards me. I would have loved you very much as a daughter, Aveline—now that I have lost you I see how much. For I see the guileless creature she after all really is," he added, to himself. "But, my dear," he went on, "as it is pretty certainly the last time we shall ever talk together in this way, let me give you a warning. It is very seldom—I don't say *never*, but very seldom that a loveless marriage turns out happily. Of course mutual respect is a good foundation—and—when there is that, and a girl does not care for any other *more*, there is less to fear."

He looked keenly at Aveline as he spoke. She felt herself change color.

"I—I meant to do right," she said, faintly. "Have I been all wrong—wrong altogether?"

"You are right now, at any rate," he replied, firmly.

"And what shall I do?" she said, with—now that the stimulus of her resolution was past—a sort of return to the helplessness which so irritated Leonora. "How can I break it off? What shall I say—how can I bear what—what mamma will say? Oh, I did not mean that," she went on, clasping her hands. "I should not have said that—but it is all so difficult."

Sir Francis reflected for a moment.

"I will do what I can to make it easier for you," he said. "I owe you that surely. I will tell my son your decision."

"Shall you tell him all I have told you?" asked Aveline.

"I shall take care that no possible blame shall attach to

you, either with him if he attempted to throw any on you, or with my wife. And if you prefer it, I will also tell your father how things stand."

"Yes," said Aveline, "I should be very grateful if you would do so. I do not want to be the cause of—of any discussion between my father and mother."

"I understand," said Sir Francis. "I will save you all the trouble I can. Now, my dear, I must ask you to say good-bye. I am very tired."

"How thoughtless I have been!" exclaimed Aveline, starting up.

"No, no. I am very weak. It is not your fault. God bless you, my dear child! I wish I could have called you such in reality. But at least I shall feel no *more* self-reproach on your account. Yes, it is really good-bye," as he held her hand a moment in his. "We shall leave Paris almost immediately now, and—there is no saying how soon I may not have to start on a longer journey still."

"Good-bye," said Aveline, "and thank you—for everything."

She drew her veil down when she rejoined Elise, and held her parasol so, when they got out into the street, that neither the maid nor the passers-by should see she was crying.

Her father and mother were fortunately dining out that evening without her, so she managed to avoid seeing either of them for more than a hurried moment. And she and Leonora spent the evening together.

There was one person who fell asleep that night with a lighter heart than for long—that person was Aveline's young sister.

CHAPTER XI.

AVELINE woke the next morning with a terrible headache. Unusual emotion or exertion was apt to result in this species of suffering with her. Many a time as a child, when some lesson difficulty—for, though gifted with intellectual capacity considerably above the average, she was not a quick or very ready learner—or sharp reprimand from her mother had sent her sobbing to bed, had the morning found her so overwhelmed with pain as to be for the time unable to take in the sense of anything said to her.

This was the case the day after her strange and painful interview with Sir Francis Ayrton.

It was “most unfortunate”—“tiresome and provoking” were the real words in her heart—said Lady Christina when Lady Ayrton called, as had been arranged, to drive Aveline and her mother on a round of shopping. “She has not had such a headache for years. I saw it coming on the day before yesterday, at the marriage. Foolish child, she is far too impressionable. She was quite upset by seeing the ceremony.”

“Poor dear—I love her all the more for it,” said Lady Ayrton. “But you will not like to leave her then, Christina? We must put off our expedition till to-morrow or the day after.”

“Oh, no,” Aveline’s mother replied; “she is best left alone in perfect quiet. I understand these headaches. I believe they can be thrown off by a person of great energy and resolution. I myself should be often ill if I *let* myself be so. But Aveline is different. She has much more of the Verney *laissez aller* about her. Why, both my husband and Bart Verney go down like lead if one of their little fingers aches. And Avé is just the same. They think themselves dying on the smallest provocation.”

"But Aveline does not feel so ill as all that, I trust?" said Lady Ayrton, anxiously. "Should you not send for the doctor, Christina? It may be the beginning of typhoid fever, or gastric fever, or who knows what."

"Oh, no, I have seen her too often like that. She will be all right in a day or two, or even sooner if she can get a good sleep. Leo is watching beside her. I assure you the only thing to do is to leave her alone. I am really not uneasy, Sophia."

Of which Sophia was already only rather too well assured.

"And what is Wilfred about this morning?" said Lady Christina, amiably, as she settled herself comfortably in her friend's luxurious landau. Material well-being always had a soothing effect upon the nerves of Aveline's mother. "I thought he spoke of coming with us."

"So he did," said his mother. "But he put his head in at the door of my room while I was dressing to come out, to say he could not possibly come. He was shut up with his father for some time this morning. They are busy arranging all about Garthdean—the tiresome part of it, I mean. The *nice* part will come afterward. I expect Sir Francis will give Aveline *carte blanche* about refurnishing it."

"How delightful!" exclaimed Lady Christina, with effusion. "Dear Sir Francis, how very generous he is!"

Poor woman! a very few hours sufficed to bring a dolorous change over the spirit of her dream.

That afternoon Mr. Verney was summoned to a private talk with Sir Francis Ayrton. At dinner-time he was silent and preoccupied in manner, but a very close observer might have detected a shade less of anxiety in his expression than had been there of late.

"How is Avé?" he asked, somewhat abruptly, of his wife.

"Oh, it will go off by the morning, I have no doubt,"

she replied, easily. "She seemed asleep quietly enough an hour or two ago."

"If she is not decidedly better to-morrow morning, you must send for a doctor," said Mr. Verney. "She has not spoken to you much to-day?"

"Not at all," said Lady Christina. "She seemed just to want to stay quiet. She is always like that when she has these headaches."

Mr. Verney said nothing for a minute or two. Then—dinner was nearly over by now—he looked up again.

"Christina," he said, "I have a good deal to talk to you about this evening. Can you arrange to be quite uninterrupted?"

"Certainly," she replied, with some surprise. "Is it about the settlements on Aveline? Sophia told me Sir Francis would be wanting to talk over business matters with you some day soon."

"He sent for me this afternoon, but it was not to talk about the settlements," said her husband. "However, we had better go into the drawing-room."

He rose as he spoke, and held open the door for his wife to pass through.

Lady Christina's maid was surprised and rather offended that evening by the peremptory way in which she was rung for, only to be told that she was not required and might go to bed.

"There's something hup," she said to herself as she slowly mounted the *escalier de service* to the *sixième*, where, on condition of a handsome present on their return to England, she had agreed to sleep, instead of rushing back to London the day of their arrival, as she had at first threatened. "And I don't see as my lady need be so short with me, considering the hinterest I feel in the family—especially in Miss Verney, poor dear. There'll be something to be thankful for if she's not down with typhoid fever, as it's called nowadays. And no wonder if it were, with these

queer ways of living—families one on top of another like berths in a steamer—which it stands to reason can't be wholesome.”

She was not a bad-hearted woman, and Lady Christina was not a bad mistress, and she could hardly have helped pitying Aveline's mother had she seen her, as she then was—sobbing, weeping bitter tears of disappointment at the news her husband had told her, that her daughter's engagement to Wilfred Ayrton was once for all and irreversibly broken off.

“And what are we to do about Chris—and all the other troubles?” had been her first exclamation, when she had realized the terrible fact.

“I don't know. I can't say. But at least we shall not have sold—yes, *sold*—our daughter, Christina,” was his reply.

He had promised Sir Francis, for Aveline's sake, to say nothing to stir up any avoidable bitterness on his wife's part. And, except for this one outburst, he had controlled himself well.

Lady Christina burst into tears.

“How can you speak so cruelly?” she sobbed out. “You know my motives, Owen. I only want to do the best for our children.”

“Then be thankful that Fate, or Providence, has thwarted what could never have turned out a best for the eldest, and, I can almost say, the dearest of them,” he replied, sternly.

“I can not help feeling as if it were Aveline's fault,” she said to herself afterward, when alone, “though I have given my word not to resent it to her. And perhaps she is not to blame. It must be something seriously wrong with Wilfred Ayrton for his own father to take part against him, as it were. But it might as well have waited to come out till they were married. For then, whatever it had been, they would have had to take care of Aveline. No, I can not help it. I *do* feel as if it were her doing, and

I must not show it. After all my exertions for her, it is too hard."

She was not of a temperament to sob herself to sleep like her daughter; she lay awake nearly all the night, longing for the morning, and was up and about earlier than usual, finding in restless energy only any relief from her aching disappointment.

The first post brought a letter from her friend. Its handwriting was of the shakiest; it was blurred and blotted with tears.

" You will know by your own feelings what I am suffering," wrote poor Lady Ayrton—" or, rather, you can not know. Without selfishness I must say it is far, far worse for me than for you. It seems to me that till now I had never realized to the full what hopes I had built on the project so cruelly dashed to pieces. But I have promised Francis to say very little, and it is true it would be useless. We are leaving Paris almost immediately. I shall look forward to seeing you, dearest Christina, in England before long, when perhaps a little time may have soothed the present bitterness of regret."

" Worse for her than for me, indeed," said Lady Christina. " Sophia is more than half a fool, but that I always knew. Worse for her than for me, indeed! Has she seven children, and none of them provided for in any way; an income on which it is *impossible* to live; a husband who has no sympathy, and is as obstinate as a mule once he takes up a notion? It's no worse for her about her son than it has always been. Every one has known since he was a school-boy that he was a coarse, selfish young brute, and Sophia need not pretend to have discovered his delinquencies for the first time. But I must answer it, I suppose; and, by the by, I had better go and see how Aveline is, as she particularly asks for news of her."

For, in a postscript, Lady Ayrton entreated to be told if " dear Aveline's " headache had left her.

It had not done so. She was very little, if at all, better than the day before. Lady Christina began to feel a little anxious. Provoked and irritated as she was, she could not but be conscious of a pang of pity as Aveline looked up with her sad, tired eyes, as if apologizing for being ill, and tried to say she was better.

"I am so sorry, mamma," she whispered, the tears welling out as she said it. With the rupture of her engagement, with the knowledge of the keenness of her mother's disappointment—for Leonora had noticed enough at breakfast that morning to be able to assure her sister that "mamma knew"—the hard, cold indignation of the last few weeks had melted away. She felt herself to be, as it were, deserving of Lady Christina's wrath; weak and worn out by all she had gone through, she was almost ready to fall back into the old groove of well-nigh slavish submission.

"I don't mind how harsh mamma is to me," she said to Leo. "I will bear anything, I am so sorry for her; and the worst of it is, I know I must *always*, now, be a source of disappointment to her. For I don't think I shall ever marry, Leo—and that is the only thing I could have done to please her. If I could—if I might but work for her and for you all! Oh! if I were only a man!"

But such thoughts only aggravated her suffering—and then the terrible headache, except at rare intervals, almost deadened her. She was to be kept perfectly quiet at all costs, the doctor said, otherwise he would not answer for the consequences. And Leo, a born sick-nurse, managed to soothe her by saying they would talk it all over afterward, there was no telling what plans they might not think of for really helping poor mamma—what Avé had to do now was to lie still and try to get well.

And by slow degrees the pain began to decrease, and the symptoms of brain disturbance to disappear.

"She will do now," said the doctor, "provided, that is

to say, you continue to keep her out of the way of any excitement. A change to the country would be the best thing if you could possibly manage it."

And Mr. Verney as he kissed his daughter, telling her cheerily that all would be right, now that she was going to be a sensible girl and get well, wished indeed it were possible.

But material cares were pressing heavily on him, poor man, at this time. A few weeks would bring his mission to Paris to an end, and it was only too clear that the expenses of the family sojourn there would be considerably in excess of the extra pay. It had been found absolutely necessary to place Chris with a private crammer, if he were to have any hope of passing his examination for Woolwich; and Arthur, the second boy, would be leaving school at midsummer, and nothing had been decided as to his career. Then the younger ones, there was no denying, were "coming on" at an alarming rate. And Bart Verney, the kindest of brothers, had done all he could, more almost than he was justified in doing. Where to turn for help to tide over the present crisis Lady Christina's husband truly did not know.

In any case, country air for Aveline was out of the question.

"She will go back to London looking infinitely worse than when she came away. I wish I had come over here alone and left them all safe at home. It would have saved money, too, and this wretched business would never have come about," thought the father, though in the bottom of his heart he was not without a shrewd suspicion that this very "business"—the prospect of its coming to pass that is to say—had been at the root of Lady Christina's determination to transport the whole family across the Channel. But there is great comfort in the truism that, at the worst, things must take a turn. They had got to the worst, apparently, by this time with the Verneys. For, just as

Aveline began to creep about again thin and languid, grateful with a half-shrinking gratitude, painful to see, for her mother's somewhat grudgingly-bestowed kindness, and Lady Christina had added up the Paris bills for the twentieth time, in vain hopes that she had overestimated their amount, down came a good fairy in the shape of faithful old Mme. de Boncœur, full of sympathy, curiosity, and genuine concern, and, most valuable of all, practical readiness to help.

"I have known nothing," she said. "Since the marriage a fortnight ago"—was it only a fortnight ago? thought Aveline, from her sofa in the corner of the room—"Alice and I are at Chateau Villers, her little place near Montmorenci—shut up, seeing no one. We wanted a rest, and we missed the child—and she and Maurice came to us for two nights. Now they are with his people, and will join us next week, and we shall all go together to Bourgogne next month. Just now we only come into Paris for a day now and then. But why did you not write, Christine, to tell us of this poor darling's illness? It was not treating us like true friends, my child."

Lady Christina glanced at her daughter.

"I thought of writing," she said, "but so much has happened. I have been so busy and so terribly engrossed. Then Aveline's illness seemed to put everything wrong."

"Naturally," said the old lady. "But still, things might be worse. The child is getting better. It is not like you to lose heart, Christine."

For all answer Lady Christina threw her arms round her old friend's neck and burst into tears.

"No," she said, "I don't think things could be much worse."

Aveline was terribly startled. She had never before seen her mother cry—"not like that, at least," she told Leo afterward; and the tears of a hard, practical, unemotional nature, when they do come, are painful to see.

"Mamma," she said, "dear mamma!" and she tried to get up and cross the room. But the words were faint, and the effort to speak seemed to choke her. In another moment she had fallen back on the sofa unconscious.

It was not a very bad faint; it was but the natural result of the agitation in the girl's weakened state. But it frightened Lady Christina thoroughly. Never since her childhood had Aveline known her mother so genuinely anxious and tender.

"It is like when I was little, and had the measles, mamma dear," she whispered, when she was, comparatively speaking, well again and able to be left in Leo's charge, while her mother went off with Mme. de Boncœur for the good talk on which the old lady insisted.

"She is very weak, poor child," said she, shaking her head sagely, when she found herself alone with Christina.

"Yes. The doctor says she should have country air. But it is impossible. We shall be returning to London in less than three weeks, and I have so much upon me to see about already. It is quite impossible."

"I don't know about that," said the old lady. "But first—tell me more, my dear Christine. You said much had happened, and I can see it has not been of a pleasant kind. Tell me all. I have known you nearly all your life. I am an old woman, and—I am a rich woman, Christine. Do not have any false pride."

For she was a very shrewd old woman, too. She guessed pretty correctly that no troubles were so likely to overcome Christina so completely as those connected with money.

And Lady Christina told her all—all, that is to say, that she herself knew. For as to the exact nature of the causes of the rupture of Aveline's engagement, Sir Francis Ayrton and Mr. Verney had determined to be silent.

"There were disgraceful things that came out about the young man. I do not know all the particulars, and of course Aveline will never know. Owen and Sir Francis

had an interview, and Aveline had already got frightened by something she had overheard. I don't know exactly how it was. I was forbidden to talk to her about it. She was already ill. But all was given up. It had to be. His poor mother feels terribly."

"Yes," said Mme. de Boncœur, "it is of course much worse for her than for you."

"That is what she said," replied Lady Christina, in some surprise. "Do you think so too? I can not see it. It is no case of pounds, shillings, and pence to *them*," she added, with a bitterness which prevented the coarseness of the speech from being too conspicuous. But to the practical, matter-of-fact old Frenchwoman it would not in any case, perhaps, have appeared in that light.

"No," she agreed, "that is true. And such cases are very serious; but still, Christina, they are not the worst. But tell me all, my dear. Is it anything new about your sons?"

It was a great relief to Lady Christina to be able to unbosom herself of all her troubles to so kind and sympathizing a listener. Mme. de Boncœur remained more than an hour closeted with her, and when the old lady left, it was with the kindest "*au revoir* then, till to-morrow, when I will call for Aveline."

And Lady Christina's face looked ten years younger when she rejoined her daughters.

"She is the best and kindest woman in the world," she exclaimed with, for her, rare effusiveness. "Aveline, you are sure to get well now. Madame de Boncœur is coming to fetch you to-morrow to take you out to the country for ten days or so. And you will see Modeste; she and her husband are to be at Château Villers next week—you will like that?"

"Yes, indeed, mamma," Aveline replied, while a faint color rose to her pale cheeks, "there could be nothing I should like so much. And I shall get quite strong, you

will see, and come back able to help you with all you will have to do when the time comes for going home. Mamma, dear," she went on, with a touching appeal in her voice, "you have been so kind to me—you will let me be a very useful daughter to you now? It is all I can do."

"You must get strong first of all," said Lady Christina. Her tone was a little hard; but Aveline did not mind; it was a good deal not to be answered, as she often had been, with chilling contempt.

"Aveline," said her mother, when Leonora had left the room, "I have not told you all that that good, kind friend has done. She has given me a check for ten thousand francs—four hundred pounds, Aveline. She insisted on it; she wanted even to make it more; she made me tell her all our anxieties. This will tide over the present difficulties, and, if only Chris gets through, the worst will surely be over."

"Oh, mamma, how good of her!" exclaimed Aveline.

"She is my oldest friend in the world, it is true. That takes away the feeling of obligation," said Lady Christina.

But Aveline thought to herself that not many "oldest friends in the world" would be capable of such thoughtful generosity.

The next day saw Aveline safely installed at the Château de Villers under the kind care of Mme. de Boncœur and her daughter.

And that same day Sir Francis and Lady Ayrton left Paris for London. Their son was to have accompanied them, but an hour or two before they were to leave a letter was brought to Sir Francis by a special messenger.

"What's this?" he said, impatiently. "Some bill, I suppose. You told me you were certain everything was settled?" he went on, turning to the courier.

"I am quite sure of it, sir," he replied. "It may, perhaps, be something of Mr. Ayrton's," he added, in a lower voice.

"If so, I have nothing to do with it, and it should not be addressed to me," said Sir Francis, as he proceeded to open it. The writing was not like that of a tradesman—of a French tradesman, especially—and the name and title were correctly given in the English way.

Sir Francis's face changed as he read the opening words. It changed still further as he read on. Finally, a grim smile, half cynical, half contemptuous, settled on to his face.

"I suppose it is what one might have expected," he said; "I suppose it *might* have been worse—it *might* have been a bar-maid or a ballet-girl—and in this case, at least, if it is so one does not know it. But oh, spirits of my ancestors of Ayrton Manor and Garthdean!"

There was no time, however, for indulgence in reflections, cynical or otherwise. Lady Ayrton at that moment entered the room.

"All is ready. I hope you are feeling pretty well, Francis. But I can not imagine what has become of Wilfred. He went out very early indeed this morning, and has not come back. But all his things are packed, Irving says."

Irving was Mr. Ayrton's own man.

"Ah!" said Sir Francis, and again the grim smile overspread his face. "Sophia, try to be sensible and not excite yourself; listen quietly, my poor dear."

It was long since her husband had addressed her so sympathizingly. Lady Ayrton thought something very dreadful must be coming. She grew deadly pale, and clutched at the table to support herself, but she endeavored to remain calm.

"What—what is it, Francis? What has happened to Wilfred? Has he had an accident? Is he—oh, no, you could not smile in that way if it were so."

"Read this for yourself. You see it is his own writing," said Sir Francis.

And, so far reassured, Lady Ayrton read as follows:

“MY DEAR FATHER,—I did my best, as you and my mother know, to marry to please *you*. It isn’t my fault that that affair came to grief. I now write to tell you that by the time you get this I shall have married to please myself. The lady is Miss Lucilla Greenflier; my mother will remember having seen her. I sha’n’t trouble you about money matters—she has lots for us both—so I can leave all that to *you*. There was such a lot of bother about the other affair, that I and Lucilla settled to manage all for ourselves. She’s the handsomest girl I’ve seen for a long time, and just the sort to suit me.

“Your affectionate son,

“WILFRED T. AYRTON.

“P.S.—Irving knows what to do with my things.

“Address Hôtel des Etats-Unis, Bâsle, till further notice. *Bon voyage*, to which Lucilla joins.”

Lady Ayrton’s pale lips moved, but no word escaped them.

“Come now, my dear Sophia, don’t take on, as the old women say,” said Sir Francis, kindly, but much in the tone he would have used to a child. “I assure you it might have been worse. You’ve seen the girl?”

“Yes,” half whispered Lady Ayrton, “the very worst style of American. A great strapping creature, fearfully overdressed. Handsome—yes, I suppose so.”

“She’ll keep him in order,” said Sir Francis, with a grim chuckle. “She’s a sharp young woman. No doubt she satisfied herself that enough of the property is entailed to secure his position, and beyond that she probably does not care. They *are* rich; I have heard of them. So she has bought herself a title—and a precious young scamp as a husband. But I am very much mistaken if Master Wilfred’s halcyon days of liberty are not at an end.”

"What shall you do?" asked Lady Ayrton.

"Do? Just what we are going to do—cross to-day, and when we get to town send for Daunt"—his lawyer—"and talk it over with him. He must satisfy himself that the marriage is perfectly regular, probably interview the lady or her guardians, if she has any, and find out what she has, if she chooses to tell. Then I must give him a fitting allowance, and—"

"Not Garthdean," interrupted his wife; "somehow it would seem to be unendurable—that American *parvenu* installed at Garthdean."

"I agree with you," said Sir Francis; "no, they shall not have Garthdean, nor any of the landed property that is not entailed. I must consider things over. There are my cousin Lionel's boys—very decent fellows, I believe. And as to ourselves, Sophia, for the short time it will probably be, we shall be more at peace, I trust. I shall try to be more patient."

Lady Ayrton's tears were dropping by now.

"Don't speak of a short time, Francis. Remember—you are all I have now."

CHAPTER XII.

THE summer had come and gone. It had been a hot one, even in England, but by the end of September stormy weather set in suddenly. A traveler arriving at Boulogne very early one morning from the south was met, to his annoyance, by the announcement that the tidal packet was not crossing.

"What a nuisance!" he exclaimed in French. "I must go on to Calais, I suppose, by the next train," for he had got out of the railway carriage before hearing the news, and the train was already moving out of the station.

"Monsieur will have plenty of time to rest himself and

eat at the hotel close to the station," said, insinuatingly, an *employé* from that same hotel, hanging about the station on the lookout for waifs and strays stranded there by the unusual state of things. "Monsieur will find it very comfortable. We have already several rooms occupied by travelers. A poor English milord is very ill; the rough crossing yesterday knocked him up. They were obliged to remain, he, and madame, and the servants. He is very ill, I fear. I was sent for the doctor at midnight."

The two, the Englishman and the hotel emissary, were by this time in the street, the latter carrying the stranger's rugs and dressing-bag. The gentleman was tired and sleepy; he had come straight through from Madrid, and the chatter of his companion passed by almost unheeded. Suddenly a word caught his attention.

"Sir Ayrton," the man was saying. "He is perhaps a friend of monsieur's, being a compatriot."

"Sir, what name did you say? You don't think all Englishmen are friends, do you? But what name did you say?"

"Ayrton," repeated the man, giving it the French pronunciation. "Sir Ayrton; I can spell it for monsieur," which he proceeded to do.

He had seen by the style of traveling of the invalid and his wife that they were people of wealth, and their sudden arrival at the hotel, and the excitement of the whole affair, had made considerable sensation. He was in a frame of mind very open to *pourboires*, and delighted to have at last attracted the new-comer's attention.

A respectable, staid-looking personage, bearing courier in every feature of his face and line of his figure, was crossing the entrance of the hotel as they went in.

"And the poor gentleman, how is he? Anything more that I can fetch for him?" inquired the commissionnaire, or whatever he was, obtrusively.

The courier stopped short and looked at him.

"The doctor will be coming again directly," he said, "just wait about till he does. I want him to advise madame to send for a *gardemalade*. There are such to be got here, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, doubtless. The sisters are in the next street," replied the man.

The stranger in his turn accosted the courier.

"I fancy I have seen you before," he said. "Are you—were you in attendance on Sir Francis Ayrton last spring in Paris?"

The poor courier's face, which had been clouded with anxiety, brightened up.

"Ah, yes, sir; I am with him six months of every year. But we have never had such a catastrophe before. He *would* cross yesterday, though my lady and I begged him not, and he has nearly, if not quite, killed himself. And here we are, quite alone, and my lady so upset, and the maid no use. May I ask your name, sir? It would be a great comfort to my lady to meet with a friend. I, too, remember your face, I think, sir."

The gentleman began rummaging in his coat-pocket—he drew out a card.

"Here," he said, "take this to Lady Ayrton, with my compliments. If she would like to see me I am quite at her service."

Luigi hastened upstairs; he was too well-bred to study the card in its owner's presence, but he had no sooner reached the landing than he set himself to do so.

"Mr. Nigel Hereward!" he exclaimed. "Ah! to be sure; I have it now. '*Secrétaire à l'Embassade de S. M. Britannique.*' To be sure. He was then at Paris—now, it appears, at Madrid. What a piece of good fortune! Ah, my lady," he continued, as he opened the door of a sitting-room, "good news," and his thin, dark, kindly face gleamed.

"Has the doctor been again? Does he think him bet-

ter?" exclaimed Lady Ayrton, starting up from the sofa, where she had been persuaded to take a little rest.

"No, no, my lady. Sir Francis is sleeping quietly. The doctor has not returned. It is that I have met a friend of your ladyship's—a gentleman now in the hotel; he sends this, and would be enchanted to be of any service."

With which rather flowery translation of Mr. Hereward's simple message, he held out the card.

Lady Ayrton took it eagerly.

"Nigel Hereward!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I am, indeed, very thankful. Beg him to come up at once, if he will, Luigi."

The courier had disappeared almost before she had finished the sentence. Two minutes more brought a knock at the door, followed by a "May I come in?" in a remembered voice.

The poor lady hurried forward, both hands outstretched.

"Oh, Mr. Hereward!" she cried. "You don't know how thankful I am to see the face of a friend. I am in such trouble; has Luigi told you? I—I don't know what to think of Sir Francis, or what the doctor really thinks;" and her voice broke down, as if the tears she had evidently been shedding were not far off. "I am afraid he is very ill, he is so very—so patient and gentle and subdued. I would give anything to hear him scolding a little," she added, with a wintery smile.

Nigel's sympathy was at once aroused.

"I am so sorry for you," he replied, cordially. "It was the bad crossing, your courier told me."

"Yes; Sir Francis never will consent to give up, once we have started, and he could not believe it would be so bad. And he was almost knocked over, and dreadfully shaken. He fainted on the boat—we thought we should never get him here. And the doctor won't tell me exactly what he thinks."

"And you are alone? Will you not telegraph to—to your son? Can I do that for you?" he asked.

"To tell you the truth, I am by no means sure where they are. They are terrible gad-abouts," she said, with another little attempt at a smile. "And I should not care to send for Wilfred unless his father expressed a wish for him. You see, we do not know his wife, and I am certain Sir Francis could not endure to have her here. And if he came, she would come too. She never leaves him—I must say she seems to be a good wife. But—it would never do for her to come."

Mr. Hereward felt and looked completely bewildered.

"You do not know Mrs. Ayrton," he said; "not know Av—Miss Verney?"

Lady Ayrton grew crimson.

"Did you not know?" she said. "Have you not heard of our sad disappointment? That *was* to have been, but it fell through. My son married an American. And to you, an old friend like you, Mr. Hereward, I may say for once what I feel is due to her—to that sweet girl. My son was not good enough for her. But it was to us a most sad disappointment."

Mr. Hereward bowed as gravely as if the fact of Wilfred Ayrton's "not being good enough for her" were an entirely new suggestion. And no one would have suspected from the perfect calm of his outward demeanor the rush of joy that had filled his heart at Lady Ayrton's explanation.

"It is not that *I* am any the more likely to win her," he reflected. "But, at least, there is not that awful feeling of desecration, as it were, connected with her now. The thought of her marrying that fellow was too unendurable. And after all—" His thoughts ran on in a kind of recklessness, the result of the reaction from the under-lock-and-key condition in which all these months he had held them. "After all, we are neither of us old yet—

'while there is youth,' at least, 'there is hope.' Who knows what may happen?

"Perhaps some night,
When new things happen, a meteor-ball
May slip through the sky."

Who knows? At least, I can think of her again now; and how little this morning did I imagine *that* would be the case before night?"

And all this time poor Lady Ayrton was meandering plaintively on with the story of her woes, firmly believing that Mr. Hereward was giving her his full attention. Her voice stopping at last brought him to himself with a shock. But before he had time to risk her discovery of his abstraction by a random answer, a tap at the door made them look round. It was Luigi again.

"My master, Sir Francis, is awake. I told him of monsieur—Mr. Hereward being here. He begs to see you, sir, at once."

"Oh, Luigi," said Lady Ayrton, tremulously, "do you think you have done right? Has it not excited him terribly?"

"Not at all, not at all, my lady," Luigi exclaimed, eagerly. His eyes were gleaming and his face brimful of satisfaction. "You will see, it will do him more good than anything. If monsieur will accompany me—"

"As I am?" said Nigel. "I've been traveling all night and I've been smoking. I'm not very fit for an invalid's room."

"It will not matter, he is so impatient," urged Luigi.

So Nigel gave in and followed the courier down the long passage.

"Sir Francis's own man had preceded us to Cannes to get all in order there," Luigi went on. "We have always done thus when we made the journey through, staying but

one night in Paris, and never before has there been a *contretemps*."

He opened the door, and Nigel entered the darkened room. At first he could scarcely distinguish Sir Francis's features—his face was as white as the pillows on which his gray, almost white, hair made but a faint shadow.

"I am grieved—" began Mr. Hereward, gently lifting the thin hand feebly held out.

"I am so delighted to see you," interrupted Sir Francis, cheerily; "I can not think of anything else. Tell me, Hereward, are you *very* pressed for time? Where are you bound for? Can you delay your journey a few hours?"

Nigel reflected—he was too considerate to make any rash promise on the spur of the moment's feeling.

"I think I can," he said. "I am going home on a few weeks' leave; but a day or two more or less is not of vital importance. There is a marriage—my sister-in-law's sister's—they wanted me to be at, but I don't think it would much matter. Home, in the strict sense of the word, you know, I have none."

"You are very good," said Sir Francis. His voice sounded even feebler than in the first flush of eager greeting. "I will tell you what I want of you. The doctor here is a fool—not professionally, perhaps—indeed, I fancy he is sharp and clever. But he will not tell me the truth about myself. I want you to see him and get it out of him. As far as I can judge by former attacks, though I have never had so bad a one as this, it is a question of the next few hours. If the worst symptoms lessen within that time there is a chance of my pulling through till the next attack (I shall not live through *another*, of that I feel sure), and I should like you to stay till this is decided, so that she, my poor wife, may not be utterly alone. But, above all, if there is this chance, don't for Heaven's sake!

telegraph for any one yet. Let that be at the *very* last—you understand?" his voice was growing almost inaudible.

Nigel bowed his head.

"I will go and see the doctor at once," he said. "In the meantime, try to keep quiet—you will do so, will you not, dear sir?"

Sir Francis smiled faintly.

"It will be easier now," he said. "I shall do my best. I don't want to die here—at least let it be in my own house."

And Mr. Hereward, entering with quick instinct and sympathy into the invalid's feelings, went off at once to the doctor, whom, by good luck, he found at home. When he left the doctor's house it was to go to the telegraph office. But the telegram was to none of the Ayrton belongings. It was to his own brother, and to the effect that he might be detained some days at Boulogne, and expressing his regret at not being able to be present at the marriage.

Then he returned to the hotel and made his way cautiously upstairs. A very slight tap at the door brought Luigi, eager and alert as ever.

"Not asleep?" whispered Nigel.

"No, no—anxious to see you," said the courier, opening the door. Mr. Hereward entered and approached the bed.

"Sir Francis," he said at once and without preamble, "I have seen the doctor. It is as you thought. You have a good chance of pulling through if the next few hours bring no aggravation of the bad symptoms."

"That is better than I thought," said Sir Francis.

"It is the truth, exactly. But even if all goes well, you must keep yourself absolutely quiet, free from *all* agitation for some days to come. And that you may feel more at rest—you kindly said my being here was a satisfaction—I have telegraphed home to Roderick that I shall be detained

here some days—in fact,” he added, with a smile, “as long as you want me.”

A mist came over the eyes of the sick man.

“Hereward, you are very good; I can not thank you enough. And it is not the first time. You did your best for that graceless boy at school. I am heavily in your debt.”

“Don’t put it in that way,” said Nigel; “it is a pleasure. Let me see you do all you can to get well by keeping quiet.”

“I will, I will,” Sir Francis replied.

“Good God!” he murmured to himself as Nigel left the room, “why could I not have had a son like that?”

And not till he had seen Lady Ayrton, and, after explaining to her the real state of things, had persuaded her to go to bed and try to sleep for some hours, promising that she might then sit up all night with Sir Francis if she liked, did Mr. Hereward remember that he was both hungry and tired himself.

The next few days passed like a curious dream to Nigel. Here he was installed almost in the place of a son to the parents of the man whom less than a week ago he had at once envied and hated with an intensity which it now appalled him to realize—nay, he had been near to hating Sir Francis and his wife themselves. He had tried and longed to hate Aveline, and imagined that he had succeeded in despising her. And now any pretext even for that mitigated form of hatred was taken from him.

For Sir Francis, once his convalescence was established, had made good use of his time. He had confided to Nigel much, though not all, of what had passed in Paris after the young man had left, and in so doing he had made himself master of a secret he had long been curious to know.

“Yes,” he said one day, “she is one of the best and sweetest girls possible. Where she erred it was from good though mistaken motives, and—”

"Her father is a man I have the greatest respect for," interrupted Nigel. He could not bear to hear Aveline's conduct discussed, even by Sir Francis. "It is only a pity he lets the reins slip so much out of his own hands."

Sir Francis smiled, urbanely.

"But with a Lady Christina for a wife, my dear fellow—" he said, deprecatingly. "Shall you see them when you go over?" he inquired.

Mr. Hereward shook his head.

"I hardly think so," he replied. "One is never sure of seeing any one at this time of the year, and I shall scarcely stay in town at all. Besides, my leave is very short. My brother wanted to see me about business matters of his own, otherwise I should have preferred to wait till later and get a longer holiday."

"And short as your time was I have made it still shorter," said Sir Francis, regretfully.

"Pray don't speak of it so," said the young man. "I am so very pleased, so thankful to have been of use—as you will say I have been," he added, with a smile.

"It is not only I that say so; ask Luigi, ask the doctor. I began to turn the corner from the moment I knew there was some one reliable at hand. That first night was horrible," he went on, with a shudder, "when I came to myself and found where I was, and imagined myself dying here, and Wilfred and that American swooping down upon us and having things all their own way, and poor Sophia quite helpless and alone. Now, if I get through this winter, and get home again for another summer, I shall be more than thankful, and I shall never leave home again."

But his "getting through the winter" and seeing home again seemed a very doubtful prospect in the eyes of Mr. Hereward the morning he at last saw his friends off, and he was somewhat surprised at every one else not sharing his misgivings.

"You really think he will live to get to Calais," Mr.

Hereward asked, anxiously, when the train had moved out of the station and he turned to say good-bye to the doctor, who had accompanied him to see them off.

"Oh, yes, oh, dear, yes," he replied. "He may go on pretty comfortably until another attack—and that, as he seems to feel himself, will be the last. But that may not be for long—a year, two years, who knows? It is you who have done the most to get him round this time," he added, politely.

So, for more reasons than one, Mr. Hereward did not regret the storm which had weather-bound him that September day at Boulogne.

CHAPTER XIII.

SEPTEMBER again, but early September, and a very different scene from the storm-tossed Boulogne coast a year ago. It is as sunny and warm as midsummer; such things as wind and tempest must surely be altogether unknown in this sheltered corner of old France, where one could picture the peaceful lives of the inhabitants droning on one century after another with little change or excitement.

"I do love this terrace so much. It must be warm and sheltered even in winter," said the taller of two girls who were sauntering up and down a wide graveled walk running along one side of an old château. There were broad shallow steps both upward and downward from the terrace, and great green painted boxes containing orange-trees at regular intervals, and down below, here and there among the trees, which made a sort of miniature forest on this side of the house, garden seats and tiny summer-houses were dotted about temptingly.

Her companion shook her head.

"Ah, as for that I should be sorry to answer. The winter is not long here, but it comes sharply and suddenly.

Of late years we have never risked meeting it here, for grandmamma could not stand cold now."

"It is nearly a month since I came," said the first speaker again. "It does not seem nearly so long to me. You don't know how I have looked forward to coming, Modeste. And I have enjoyed it *so much*."

"Not more than we have enjoyed having you. Maurice says you must certainly come to us every year—it is one of the nice things in England that girls can pay visits to their friends in this way—at least till you are married."

"Then you may look forward to having a long series of visits from me," said Aveline, laughing. "I shall never marry, Modeste. I am twenty-three years now, and I think I can tell."

Young Mme. de Bois-Hubert looked sorry.

"I hope you will," she said. "It is so sad not to be married—at least so we think. In England it is not thought quite the same."

"It would appear so, certainly," said Aveline. "So many women are never married. But they don't all look as if it was because they had never cared to marry," she went on, with a little laugh. "It seems badly managed somehow—I *feel* as if I should manage better if I were a mother with daughters; but perhaps I should be just as puzzled as other people. I am almost like a mother as it is—with Leo. I do so hope that nothing will ever make her unhappy."

"There is no fear," said Modeste, with a little hesitation, "of your mother wishing her to marry any one she does not care for."

"Leo would not do it. She has more decision of character than I have. And besides—no, I think poor mamma has left off making plans. It makes me sorry to think that I shall probably always be a disappointment to her. We must hope things will go better with Leonora."

"But you said, dear Aveline, that you had not been un-

happy all this time—that you felt you were helping your father and mother?"

"Yes," said Miss Verney, "I think so—I hope so. Things have been better. But I was glad to come away from home for a little. Poor mamma was rather upset lately when Sir Francis Ayrton died, and people began talking of the splendid fortune his son had come into, and how handsome the new Lady Ayrton is, and all that kind of talk."

"Horrible people," said Modeste. "You don't mean she—your mother—wishes you had married him?"

"I don't know, really," said Aveline. "I don't, and that is of more consequence. No; twenty times over better be an old maid than marry a man like that. But he hasn't turned out so badly since his marriage; his wife keeps him in very good order, they say. I am very glad of it, for poor Lady Ayrton's sake."

"He would have killed *you*," said Mme. de Bois-Hubert. "You could not have managed him."

"No," said Aveline, "I don't think I could. I have not much strength of character, Modeste. I fear I have given several people reason to despise me; that is the sorest feeling I ever have," she added, with a look in her eyes that her friend could not bear to see.

"Aveline, you are never to say that. It is not so. No one who knows you could dream of despising you. You are morbid on that point," said Modeste, earnestly.

"Well, we won't discuss it," said Aveline, lightly. "You—all of you—are too good to me. No one ever cheers me as you do, and I owe you more than I can tell."

They had wandered down among the trees by now, and had seated themselves on one of the benches. The sweet, soft air came fluttering gently through the branches; the indescribable pathos of the autumn was already beginning to be perceptible.

"I suppose," said Miss Verney, glancing upward at the

old house, "this place has changed very little for—how long? A century or two at least."

"It was partly destroyed in the Revolution," said Modeste; "but it was restored exactly as it had been. So I suppose it looks the same. But strange scenes must have passed here, nevertheless."

"And old people have died, and young ones grown into their places; happy brides like you, Modeste, have come here, and little babies have been born, and men and women have been joyful and sorrowful; and the birds go on singing, and the wind whispers through the trees just the same—just the same. Isn't everything strange in this world?" said Aveline, dreamily.

Modeste smiled indulgently. Her friend's fancies made her smile a little sometimes.

"I don't know," she said. "Things are as they were meant to be, I suppose. The world is a very nice place, I think. Only I do feel sometimes almost ashamed to be so happy, for I don't deserve it, and so many others better than I are not so."

"Dear little Modeste," said Aveline, "you do deserve prosperity, for it never makes you selfish."

At that moment a step was heard coming along the gravel. It was Modeste's husband.

"What are you two young ladies so busy talking about?" he said. "Have you not yet completed all the confidences accumulated since you were last together?"

His tone was light and rallying. But his wife knew him so well that she detected traces of something unusual, something to be told, beneath his trifling words. She glanced up inquiringly, but so that Aveline could not perceive the question in her eyes. M. de Bois-Hubert nodded his head slightly.

"Yes—another letter," he whispered, so low that but for the motion of his lips Modeste could scarcely have understood the words.

"The letters have just come—none for you, mademoiselle," he said, addressing Aveline. "But, Madame de Boncœur is quite in a flutter. An old friend is to arrive here to-day, on his way from London to somewhere or other—Madrid, I think. A compatriot of yours, mademoiselle?"

"An Englishman!" exclaimed Aveline—the word Madrid had already caught her attention.

"Exactly. And by the bye, an old acquaintance of yours, too, Monsieur Hereward. You knew him, of course, when your family was in Paris?"

"Yes," said Aveline, calmly, but very gravely. "If only I had known it before, even yesterday," she said to herself, "I would have managed to go. But as it is, I must stay and bear it. It would be undignified to do otherwise. But it is very hard. I had so hoped never to see him again. Oh, I do trust they suspect nothing."

"Monsieur Hereward," said Modeste. "Ah, *bonne maman* will be very pleased and quite excited. He has always promised to pay us a visit some day, *en passant*, but till now he has never been able to do so, though he dined with us last winter in Paris one day."

"I did not know you had seen him since—since that time in Paris," said Aveline.

She was very pale by this time; her lips even were white. But she was unconscious of this, and the young husband and wife were far too wise to seem to notice it.

"Oh, yes," said Modeste, lightly, "we have never lost sight of him. He is a very steady friend. He was always so pleased to hear of you from us. Oh, dear me, it is getting chilly. Let us go in, Aveline. I do hope *déjeuner* is nearly ready."

Aveline rose, and Modeste drew her friend's arm within her own.

"Does—will not Mr. Hereward be surprised to see me here?" said Aveline.

"Oh, no; *bonne maman* has very likely told him you were here. She writes to him often. You must arrange a shooting-party for him, Maurice," she went on, "if he stays to-morrow."

Mme. de Boncœur met them on the *perron*. She was in high spirits, but addressed herself chiefly to her granddaughter.

"Modeste," she said, "there are some letters I want you to help me write before the postman calls. I don't want to be busy when Monsieur Hereward arrives. Aveline, my dear, you will excuse us for an hour or two?"

"Of course, dear madame," said Aveline, only too glad to be alone. "I am always happy in the garden. And to-day is so lovely."

She quickly made a little plan in her head of how she would stay out till late, and manage to avoid meeting the expected guest till they were all together assembled in the drawing-room before dinner.

"It will not be so difficult after the first meeting," she thought.

And, *déjeuner* over, Aveline strolled off further than the garden. She made her way into the woods, penetrating as far as she dared without risk of losing her way.

"I should not like a hue and cry after me. That would be anything but desirable," she said to herself with a smile.

The woods were very charming this afternoon. Aveline found a pleasant seat on some felled trees, and there she established herself nominally to read, in reality to think. But in spite of herself her thoughts were less consequent than usual. The prospect of seeing Nigel again had brought with it a certain excitement, notwithstanding the painful shrinking with which she anticipated it. She was so young still, and life might have been so fair—so very fair for her!

"But I had begun to think of it as all in the far past,"

she thought. “It is hard to have the old pain forced upon me—the dreadful feeling of mortification above all.”

A little bird fluttered down from a branch hard by. It was so tame, for these woods were seldom visited, that it hopped up fearlessly close to Aveline, and seemed to glance at her sympathizingly with its bright, sparkling eyes. All animals loved the girl, she was so gentle and quiet. She smiled at the little creature, and watched it with interest.

“Hush!” she whispered, involuntarily, as a step, crunching the already fallen leaves, sounded near, “hush! They will frighten the poor little bird,” she added to herself, under her breath, and she glanced up, expecting to see some woodman or peasant-boy trudging homeward in his *sabots*.

But a sudden cry escaped her; she started up, and stood as if turned to stone when the intruder met her view. It was Nigel Hereward!

“Mr. Hereward!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, Miss Verney,” he said, “I have had such a hunt to find you. They told me you were sure to be somewhere in the grounds near the house—that you never went further.” He paused, seemingly quite out of breath.

“And they have been uneasy about me,” she said. “I am so sorry. It was thoughtless of me. I will go back at once,” and she was hastening off, when Mr. Hereward arrested her by his words.

“Miss Verney,” he said, rather ruefully, “I wish you would give your pity to those who deserve it. Mesdames, our amiable *châtelaines*, are not in the least uneasy about you. But I—am very much out of breath. Will you not allow me five minutes’ grace to recover myself?” and he seemed as if he would seat himself on the tree she had just quitted, and looked up at her half anxiously, half comically.

“Five hours, if you like,” said Aveline, with a slight and rather forced laugh, “only I must go in. It is later than I thought.”

"What a story!" said the young man to himself. "She wants to escape from a *tête-à-tête*, that is the truth. What if I am wrong after all? What if that child was wrong!"

And the rueful predominated over the comical as he rose slowly again.

"I can not let you go home alone, seeing that I came on purpose to find you," he said, seriously.

Aveline flushed crimson.

"I am so sorry. I never thought of it," she said, penitently. "I have never even thanked you for coming to fetch me. Just as you arrived! But I do think Madame de Boncœur or Modeste might have sent one of the servants."

"Yes," said Nigel, curtly, "I think so too, if they had sent any one. But they did not. I came of my own accord. And you have not only not thanked me, you have not even shaken hands with me. And it is sixteen months and a fortnight, and as nearly as possible twenty-two hours since we met. The last time I saw you was one afternoon the April before last, at the Ayrtons' hotel, when I told you I was going away."

He looked at her as he spoke. He was leaning against a tree.

"Won't you sit down again for two minutes?" he said.
"You might do as much as that for me, surely."

Aveline sat down. She was very pale now.

"Aveline," he began, speaking quietly, with the quiet that comes of extreme self-restraint, "you are too good to play with me or to fence with me. If I spoke for an hour it would be no use, I know, if—if you feel it can't be. But I have come here on purpose—if you reject me I shall go away this afternoon. Do you think—do you think you can care for me enough to marry me, dear?"

Aveline raised her face. It was bathed in tears.

"Are you in earnest? Is it not out of pity?" she said.
"I thought you despised me."

"Who told you so?" he said, almost fiercely.

"Mamma," replied Aveline, impulsively. "She said I had shown you I had cared for you, and that you pitied me, and thought me—oh, I can't say it clearly, but you can understand. She said I was a fool, and that you had seen too many girls to think seriously of things like that. She said I should have known you were not thinking of marrying, and—"

"Then you did care for me?" he interrupted, forgetting all the rest. "And do you still? Can you forgive me if I made you suffer? I did not mean it. I thought I could bear it *myself*, and that you would not care. I thought your mother would never have thrown us together so much, had she not been sure you were in no danger of caring."

"And what has made you think otherwise now?" she said, smiling a little, a very little, through her tears.

He smiled too.

"Never mind that just now," he said. He was kneeling beside her now, so that he could see the sweet blue eyes which no longer evaded his gaze. "Say it, dear, that you care for me. I don't mind if it is not so much as I care for you. It could not be."

"I don't need to say it," she whispered. "And that isn't true; it *is* as much. It must be, for I could not care for you more than I do, Nigel."

The soft autumn breezes fluttered and murmured through the trees; a faint rustling among the dry leaves made Aveline look up. The little bird was there again. She touched Nigel gently.

"He has come to wish us good luck," she said, softly.

And in a little while Nigel explained it all to her.

"Your mother was right so far," he said. "I could not dream of marrying. I was too poor. But beyond that, how dared— No, she is your mother, and we are going to be so happy we can forgive it all. It is only

within the last week or two that things have changed. I have been to England to see all about it. Sir Francis Ayrton has left me a legacy, which insures comfort if not luxury to us."

"Oh," said Aveline, clasping her hands, "how good of him! Do you think it was partly—" then she stopped and grew crimson again.

"Yes, dear. I think it was partly, greatly, for you, though he worded it so as to seem natural. He was good enough to say I had been of service to him. He did not think he would have lived so long—he had been lingering on month after month, not realizing how time was going. Had he done so he would have told me, though I don't know that I could have agreed to it, while he lived," he added. "I got to know him very well that time at Boulogne," he went on.

"I heard of that," said Aveline. "But—you knew about what I did—what I consented to after I thought that you despised me—"

Nigel placed his finger on her lips. "Hush! don't say such things," he said. But she persisted. "Yes, I must. It was that made me do it. I thought I was no good, no use in the world. I hated myself. I thought I would try to make them all happier."

"It was not your fault," he said, hastily.

"Yes, it was," she repeated, sturdily. "I know it was wrong; my best friends, Modeste and Leo, they helped to show it to me."

"And you undid it—bravely. I know that," he said; "Sir Francis told me."

"And was it by him that you began to think—that I—that I did care?"

"Partly—not altogether. I will tell you. She does not know herself how much she told me. It was Leo, good little Leo. I called at your house last week, just to find out where you were. Your mother was out. I saw Leo."

Aveline's eyes sparkled.

"Nigel," she said, "that is one thing we may be able to do—to take care of Leo, and prevent her suffering as I have done."

"My darling!" he exclaimed.

"And what will mamma say?" added Aveline, afterward, when they were making their way home through the woods.

"She will grin and bear it, I suppose," said Nigel, calmly.

"Better, perhaps, to have me married to a—I suppose you will never be a *rich* man?—than not at all, she will think," said Aveline, laughing.

What every one else said—Leonora, Mr. Verney, Mme. de Boncœur and "her children," as she called her little family group in the kindly French way—there will be no difficulty in imagining.

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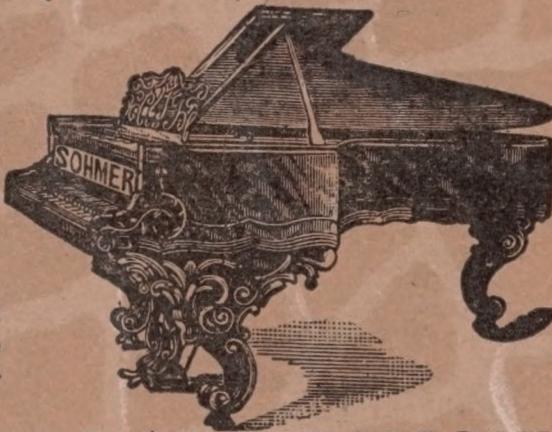
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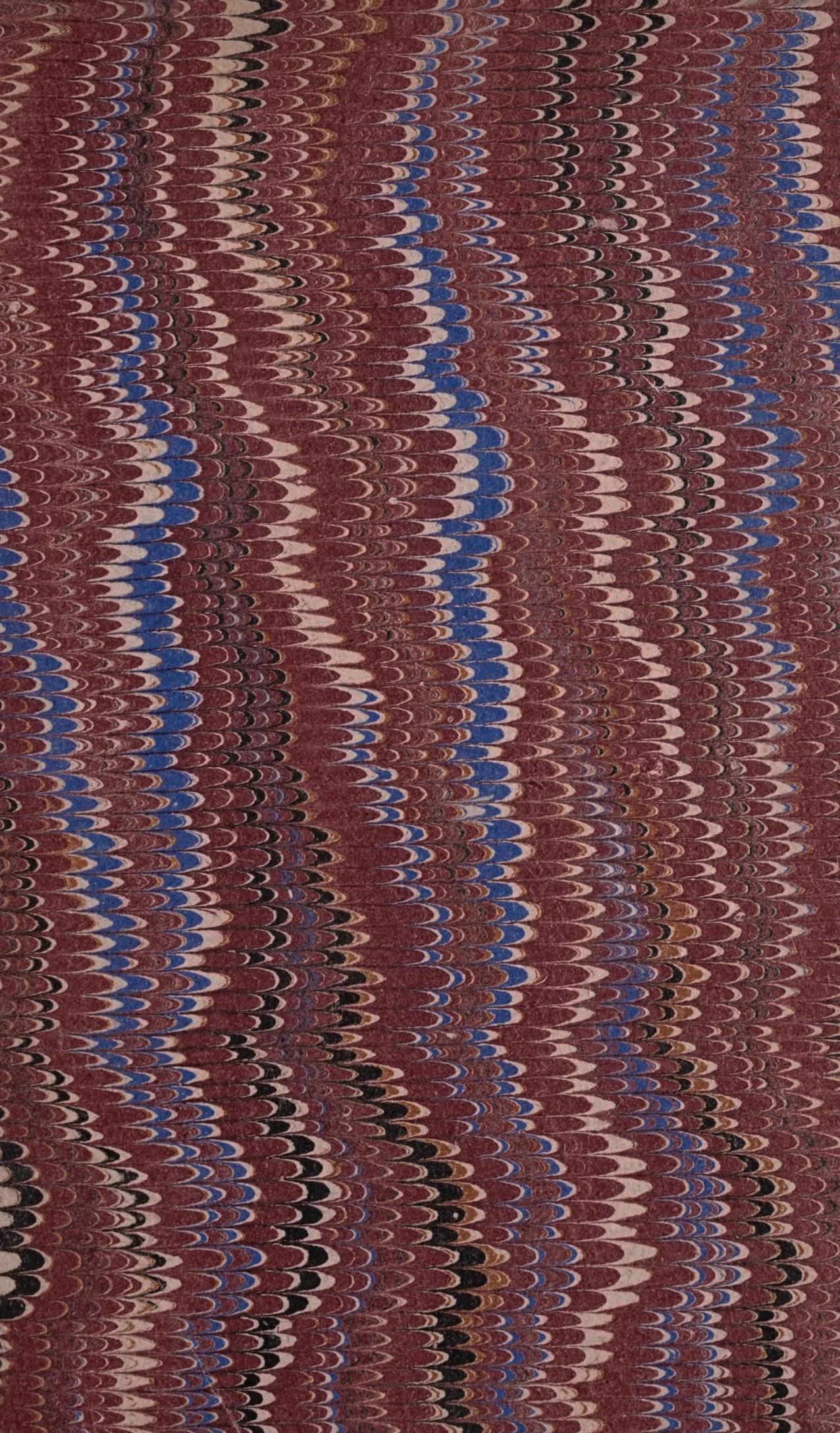
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